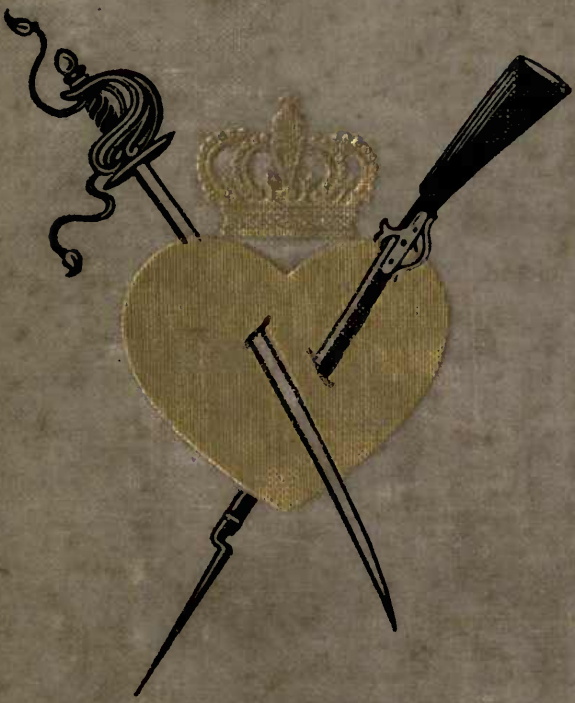
KINGS IN ADVERSITY



EDWARD S. VAN ZILE

KINGS IN ADVERSITY

BY

EDWARD S. VAN ZILE

AUTHOR OF "THE MANHATTANERS," "THE LAST OF THE VAN SLACKS," ETC.

"Kings are like stars—they rise and set, they have
The worship of the world, but no repose."—SHELLEY.

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KINGS IN ADVERSITY.

THE CROWN PRINCE OF REXANIA.

CHAPTER I.

ALMOST within a stone's throw of the antique structure that for a full century has been known to New Yorkers as St. Mark's Church stands a mansion that has had, like Eden, its glory and its fall. Once it was the home of aristocracy and wealth. To-day it is an eating-place for those whose lot is poverty and whose faith is democratic.

At the moment at which our story opens, the rooms in which in the old days portly Knickerbockers indulged in stately feasts are crowded with picturesque waifs from the Old World, who have, for a variety of reasons, crossed the Atlantic to air their woes in a freer atmosphere than surrounded them at home. A *table-d'hôte* dinner, greasy, cheap, and plentiful, is the magnet that has drawn from the East Side many of its most daring spirits, men with great grievances and enormous appetites. While emphasizing the former and appeasing the latter, these men grow

loquacious and blow white clouds of cigarette smoke toward the ceilings; and the dinner nears its end.

It is with a group of four foreign malecontents that we must seat ourselves in spirit, for they have a mighty matter under discussion, and in their conversation lies the explanation of certain startling episodes that occurred in the metropolis last year, the details of which have not been made known hitherto either to the public or to the police.

"You feel sure, Posadowski," a frowzy-headed, full-bearded man was saying in the purest Rexanian, a dialect spoken by only a few hundred East-siders, "you feel sure that you have the dates exactly as they should be?"

"I will read you the letter, Rukacs, and you can make your own calculations," answered Posadowski, a better-groomed man than his companions, nearing middle age, but with a fresh complexion and a clear, gray eye that could look like ice or gleam with fire, as the spirit of the man ordained. His companions bent toward him eagerly, as he took from his pocket a letter bearing a foreign postmark. Lighting a fresh cigarette, Posadowski read, in a low voice, the following epistle:

"DEAR BROTHER: Strange things have happened in Rexania. The crown prince has left here in disguise. Three men only know this, the king, the prime minister, and myself. If they knew that I held their secret, this would be my last letter—eh, my friends? But they will never suspect me—the best servant in the palace—of communicating with such rebellious rascals as you, Posadowski

and Rukacs and the rest of you. The king was bitterly opposed to Prince Carlo's journey. But Carlo is no longer a boy. He is a clever, active-minded, studious man, who might have been one of us if he had not been born a crown prince. He has great influence over Prime Minister Fejeravy, and persuaded him to plead with the king. Carlo has set out for America, and travels incognito. I have risked my life to tell you that he will reach New York on the *Wiendam*, under the title of Count Szalaki. He has promised to return as soon as he has crossed the continent and visited Chicago and San Francisco. The fact is that the prince is anxious to see for himself how a country looks that is governed by its people. Poor fellow! I have long felt sorry for him. Upon his firmness at his father's death will depend the maintenance of the Rexanian monarchy, and I feel sure that he is only half-hearted in his assumed regard for royalty. But I dare not waste more time on this hasty letter. I am obliged to spend nearly all my time quieting suspicions that I fear I may have aroused in this palatial hotbed of treachery and intrigue. Nevertheless, my brothers, reflect on this: fate has placed a great opportunity in your power. The king is old and failing. If the crown prince is not at hand when the king dies—well, there will be no more kings in Rexania. The people love the prince; but if he is not here when the sceptre falls from his father's hand he will never be crowned. It is in your control—the future of Rexania. I and my fellow-republicans—we are very quiet at present—leave it to you to make Rexania free. If the king dies and the crown

prince is not here, no power on earth can prevent the republic. My love and devotion to you all. Courage! We trust to you."

The faces of the conspirators had turned pale as Posadowski had slowly and impressively emphasized the pregnant sentences of the revolutionist who defied death at the king's right hand.

"He is magnificent," exclaimed Posnovitch, the oldest member of the quartette, a gigantic man, with picturesque gray locks.

"Yes. How little we have to fear, compared with a spy who knows the king's secret thoughts and who lives under Fejeravy's eye," remarked Rukacs. "But tell me, Posadowski, have you a plan of action in your mind?"

"There is only one thing to do." said Ludovics, a small, black-whiskered man with feverish eyes and nervous manner. "Count—Count Szalaki, I think, was the name he took, was it not?—must not leave this country alive."

"Hush!" whispered Posadowski, imperatively, as a waiter refilled their coffee-cups. "You were always reckless, Ludovics. There may be a way open to us that does not require bloodshed. The crown prince, we are told, is not a monarchist at heart."

"Don't be deceived by that fact—if it is a fact," returned Ludovics, hotly. "He won't abdicate. Whatever may be his inner convictions, he has an hereditary liking for a throne, and I'm sure that his visit to this country will destroy all fondness that he may have begotten, in his imagination, for republics."

His companions looked at the speaker suspiciously. Was he growing reactionary in his views? was the question that came into their minds.

"Don't mistake me," he continued, noting their look of consternation. "I am as good a republican as walks the earth, but I don't think a surface view of this country will have an influence upon the crown prince tending toward a great renunciation on his part. He will return to Rexania more determined than he is at present to rule. I tell you, my brothers, the prince must be destroyed, if he won't be converted."

There was silence for a time. Finally, Posnovitch beckoned to a waiter and ordered brandy for the quartette.

"Posadowski, what do you propose?" asked Rukacs, smiling as he glanced confidingly at the real leader of the group.

The clear-eyed Rexanian gazed thoughtfully at his companions. "Our steps must be guided by circumstances," he remarked, guardedly. "The *Wiendam* is due here on the 7th. It is now the 5th. One of us must make it his duty to shadow the prince and keep informed of his every movement."

"You're the man to do it, Posadowski," exclaimed Posnovitch, with conviction. "You have become more Americanized than the rest of us, and won't create suspicion. Will you accept the responsibility?"

Posadowski sat silent for a time, puffing cigarette smoke thoughtfully and looking at his companions, who were watching him eagerly.

"Perhaps you are right, Posnovitch. I see no reason why I should not take the prince

in tow. But let me impress several things upon you all. Listen. We must arrange a plan whereby I can summon you here at an hour's notice. I have in mind a scheme that will require firmness on our part, but is not attended with any great danger. Not that any of you fear that. We all got used to it in the revolutionary days, ten years ago. Rexania was not a bed of roses at that time, was it, Rukacs? But to the point. That brandy has made me sentimental, and I'm tempted to dwell on the past rather than the future. Now, my brothers, if you really wish to leave this matter to me for the time being, I will do my best to satisfy you all. Our aim is simply this: to keep the crown prince in this country—which means, of course, within our immediate vicinity—until the king dies. An interregnum of even one day would be fatal to monarchy in Rexania. To-morrow night I will tell you all the details of my plan. Meanwhile, let us be seen together as little as possible. Posnovitch, come to me in the morning. I have a journey that I want you to make into Westchester County. And be careful of the brandy to-night. You must have a clear head to-morrow to carry out your part of the plan. Do you understand me?"

"Well enough to keep sober," answered the elderly giant, good-naturedly.

"And so good-night, my brothers," said Posadowski, as he arose to leave the room. To each of them he gave his hand, and before he turned to go bent down to them and in solemn tones cried, feelingly, "God bless Rexania and make her free!"

CHAPTER II.

"I CONSIDER him," said Mrs. Strong, wife of Gerald Strong the banker, "I consider him, Kate, the handsomest and most attractive man I have ever met. Everybody on the steamer was charmed with him. Even your father, who is not impressionable, was fascinated by Count Szalaki."

"His name sounds like the toothache," remarked Kate Strong, gazing at her mother with an unbending countenance. They were seated in the drawing-room of one of the most luxurious homes in upper Fifth Avenue, half an hour before the time set for dinner.

Kate Strong resembled her mother in face and figure. They were tall, graceful women, with clear-cut, patrician features. The difference in their ages was not strongly marked. Mrs. Strong often remarked playfully that she and her daughter had grown up together. But, while Mrs. Strong's hair had begun to turn white beneath the touch of advancing years, the golden glory of youth still rested upon Kate's head. Furthermore, there was a great contrast in the habitual expression that animated their respective faces. There were firm, almost harsh, lines around Mrs. Strong's mouth that told of a strong will and indicated a set purpose in life. Kate's face, beautiful in contour and dazzling in the freshness of its tints, betrayed a

rebellious, restless nature that had not yet found in existence an ambition that fully satisfied her soul. The mother's lips seemed fashioned for command, the daughter's for something they had not yet tasted.

"You are so flippant, Kate," remarked Mrs. Strong, reprovingly. "I am sure that when you see the count you will not feel inclined to joke about anything connected with him—not even his name."

"He seems to have hypnotized you, mamma. Tell me about him. Is he very high in rank?"

Mrs. Strong smiled at her daughter's show of interest. It pleased her.

"We really don't know, Kate, just how prominent he is in Rexania. It's a queer country, you know. They're always having outbreaks there, and the kings and nobles have to go armed most of the time. But your father says that the count, although he is very reticent about his country and its affairs, seems to be on intimate terms with all the crowned heads of Europe."

At this moment, Ned Strong, a youth a few years older than Kate, entered the room, carefully attired in evening dress.

"I suppose, mamma, that your friend the count will be late. It's a way those foreigners have. There's no snap about them: is there, Kate?"

The girl looked up admiringly at her tall, handsome brother, whose manly, vibrant voice indicated an energetic temperament that possessed large dynamic possibilities for good or evil.

"That's the reason I like them," she exclaimed, inconsistently. "They don't seem

to feel that they were put into the world to do something. They are clever. They made their ancestors do their work."

Ned Strong glanced at his mother quizzically.

"I wish," he said earnestly, "that we could get Kate to have a few firm convictions. What she is in favor of one day she is sure to be opposed to the next. It is so hard to tell what she really thinks."

Kate smiled amusedly. "Forgive me, Ned," she implored. "I'm sorry I don't please you. But I'll make you a promise. If you are really anxious to know what I think of Count Szalaki, I'll tell you to-night after he has gone. But here's papa. He knows more about Count Szalaki than mamma does."

"Yes, father," put in Ned, rising as Gerald Strong, a portly, clean-shaven, gray-haired man, entered the drawing-room. "Tell us about the count. Is there anything to him besides his title?"

"Yes, Ned, I think there is," answered Mr. Strong, seating himself and looking at his watch. "He's got manners and good looks, speaks several languages, and seems to have read a good deal. But he's awfully green about this country. He really seemed to think that Chicago was more of a place than New York. He'll get over that, of course. I wanted to have him meet some of our people to-night, but he begged me to receive him *en famille*. He seems to dread notoriety."

"That looks suspicious," commented Kate.

"I am astonished, Kate," exclaimed Mrs. Strong. "One would think that you could

not trust your father and myself to travel alone for fear that we should be imposed upon. Count Szalaki wants to see the country, not to be interviewed by reporters."

"By the way," remarked Ned, looking at his father, "are there many Rexanians in New York?"

"A few hundred, I believe, on the East Side," answered Mr. Strong, who had taken a practical interest in politics during the revival of reform movements. "Most of them came over here about ten years ago, when the present king banished a large number of revolutionists. I have heard that they make good citizens, but are inclined to talk anarchy when under the influence of beer."

"Did you talk politics with the count?"

"I tried to," answered Mr. Strong, again glancing at his watch, for he was sorely in need of a dinner. "He is a very sensible young man, considering the fact that he has a title and estates in a monarchical country. But he got more out of me than I obtained from him. He asked me a hundred questions —some of them really laughable—about our form of government and my opinion of the ability of a free people to rule themselves."

"Of course," remarked Ned, sarcastically, "you gave him to understand that we place entire confidence in the 'people,' *hoi polloi, demos.* You said nothing to him about 'bosses'?"

Mr. Strong glanced at his son deprecatingly.

"Satire is not your strong point, Ned. Of course I didn't dwell upon the defects of our system to the count. I rather encouraged him to think that our experiment in

self-government had been a thorough success."

"It certainly has, father—for the bankers," commented the young man, gazing quizzically at Mr. Strong.

"Isn't Ned unbearable!" cried Kate, warmly. "Perhaps, Ned, you'll be willing to tell the count just how this country ought to be governed."

"I leave that to you, Kate. Don't you attend Professor Smith's lectures on representative government? Surely the count can learn more about our institutions from the women of our set than from the men."

"We have more patriotism," cried Kate.

"No, you have more leisure," answered Ned.

"Be quiet, children," whispered Mrs. Strong, nervously, as the butler appeared at the door and announced:

"Count Szalaki."

A young man entered the drawing-room hastily, and bent courteously over Mrs. Strong's outstretched hand.

"He looks like Lord Byron," whispered Kate to her brother. Then she turned and met the smiling eyes of a youth whose glance was strangely magnetic.

CHAPTER III.

"You have never been in Europe, then, Miss Strong?"

Count Szalaki turned smilingly to his *vis-à-vis* as they seated themselves at the dining-table in a room that appeared luxurious even to the eye of the guest. There was a peculiarity in his pronunciation that defies reproduction in cold type. His voice was gentle and carefully modulated, and the English language seemed to do homage to his rank, for it fell from his lips in a musical softness that was extremely pleasing to the ear.

Kate Strong was fascinated, against her will, by the dark gray eyes of the picturesque youth at her side. His black hair curled romantically about a high, white brow, and his mouth, symmetrically curved, indicated an imaginative and generous temperament. His white, even teeth added vastly to the brilliancy of his smile. There was a touch of embarrassment in his manner, now and then, that seemed to exact sympathy from his entertainers.

"Not since I was quite young," answered Kate, with the air of one who has reached extreme old age.

"My sister," remarked Ned Strong, as the butler removed his soup-plate—"my sister, Count Szalaki, is a tremendous democrat, you know. She won't go to Europe, I fear,

until every country over there has become a republic."

"How unfair!" cried Mrs. Strong, glancing deprecatingly at her son.

"Then, Miss Strong, you don't approve of foreign aristocrats?" asked the count gently, smiling at Kate in a confiding way.

"Indeed I do," she returned, looking defiantly at Ned. "We should be very dull in our set, you know, without them."

"But you don't take them *au sérieux*?" asked the count, anxious to stand on solid ground.

"Indeed we don't," cried Kate. "We marry them, you know."

Count Szalaki looked at his host in a puzzled way, and Mr. Strong smiled benignantly.

"I think I told you on the steamer, count," remarked Mr. Strong, "that you would find it easier to understand our political institutions than our American girl, did I not?"

Count Szalaki looked at Kate, an expression of admiration in his eyes that savored not at all of boldness. "I think," he said, "that I shall take your politics for granted and attempt the solution of the greater puzzle."

"Take my advice and don't do it, Count Szalaki," cried Ned. "Our politics are laughable, but our American girl is—is——"

"Is what, Ned?" asked Kate, with mock cordiality.

"Is dangerous," answered her brother. "You see, count, you come here several years too late. When I was young," he continued, smilingly, "that is, about two years ago, we were not under the depressing influence of the New Woman. But now it is different. The New Woman——"

Count Szalaki's mobile face bore an expression of bewilderment.

"Pardon me," he exclaimed. "I am what you call—puzzled. I have not heard that expression heretofore. What do you mean by the New Woman?"

"Don't speak, Ned," cried Kate, imploringly. "Let me tell Count Szalaki what the New Woman is."

"That is better, Ned," remarked Mr. Strong, diplomatically. "It would be unfair for the count to get your definition first."

"I really think," put in Mrs. Strong, anxiety in her voice, "that we ought to change the subject."

Count Szalaki glanced at her with a mournful smile on his lips and a pleading glance in his eloquent eyes.

"But, Mrs. Strong, you must take pity on me. Remember, I am only a barbarian. In my country, you know, we go very slowly. We cling to old forms, old customs, old ideas. That is why I came over here. I wished to broaden my mind and to keep in touch with the progress of the age."

"Then there are no advanced women in Rexania?" asked Ned, courteously.

Count Szalaki seemed to wince as the name of his fatherland was brought into the discussion. Kate afterward said that he actually turned pale.

"I can hardly say that," answered their guest, rather sadly, as it seemed. "There are women there who are discontented with our institutions, who are desirous of changes in all directions. I was only a boy at the time of the great outbreak in my country, ten years ago, but I remember that among

the rioters were many women. One woman led a party of malcontents who attacked the palace. The guards were preparing to shoot her, when I saw what they were about to do and ordered them to lower their guns. Five years later, I was thrown from my horse while hunting in a forest, not far from Rexopolis, and broke my arm. I was carried to a hut in the woods, and an elderly woman very gently cared for me until help arrived from the palace. Before they took me away, she confided to me that she was the rebel who had led the attack on the palace and whose life I had saved. She became a loyal subject from the moment I gave the order that saved her life. She is now in the employ of the king, and is doing good service in keeping him informed of the doings of those who plot against the throne."

An expression of surprise had crossed the faces of the diners at their guest's tale.

"Pardon me," remarked Ned, as the count ceased to speak, "but do you live in the palace at Rexopolis?"

If Count Szalaki felt any annoyance at his own loquacity he controlled it successfully. The influence of his surroundings had made him quite forget, for the time being, that he was hiding behind an incognito, and that ordinary prudence demanded that he should keep his secret. With a strong effort, he succeeded in suppressing all signs of dismay at his unguarded recklessness. His life had tended to make him diplomatic, but his nature was frank and confiding, and he was very sensitive to his environment. "Surely," he thought, "these hospitable, kindly, democratic people are not of a suspicious charac-

ter." The thought reassured him, and he said:

"I have a relative near the throne, you know. I sometimes spend several weeks with him at the palace."

"Then you know the king?" cried Kate, interestedly. "I have read so much about him. And the crown prince? Is he as handsome as the newspapers say he is?"

It was an embarrassing question, and the prince drank a half-glass of champagne before answering his fair *vis-à-vis*.

"I may be prejudiced in his favor," he said, at length, "but he is young and in good health, and, I think, pleasing to the eye." Then he added, hurriedly, "But I am here to learn all about this country, not to talk about my own. Tell me, is Chicago far from New York?"

The conversation gradually drifted into safer channels, and Count Szalaki had begun to feel that his indiscretion had given him the only nervous shock that he would experience during the evening, when the butler approached the guest's chair and said, apologetically:

"Pardon me, monsieur, but this note has just been presented at the door by a man who says that it must reach you at once."

Count Szalaki's face flushed and then turned very pale. His hand trembled slightly as he took the envelope from the outstretched tray. It bore the name he had chosen for his incognito, and in the corner were written, in the Rexanian dialect, the words "Important and immediate."

"Will you forgive me," said the count, glancing at Mrs. Strong, "if I open this at

once? There seems to be some mystery about it."

His hostess smiled and bowed, and the youth opened the missive and read the following startling sentences, written, like the words on the envelope, in the purest Rexanian:

"YOUR ROYAL HIGHNESS,—A great danger threatens you. But trust to us. We are your friends. Dismiss your carriage on leaving the house, and walk down the avenue. Two men will join you who love you and your house. We are under oath to guard you from harm, and take this way to warn you. In the name of Rexania, be prudent."

The letter was unsigned, and an expression of consternation and perplexity rested on the prince's face as he reread the note and then carefully inserted it in a pocket of his waistcoat.

CHAPTER IV.

By a strong effort of will, the prince controlled his agitation, and, eying the butler keenly, asked:

"Is the man who brought this note awaiting an answer?"

"No, monsieur. He went away at once."

"Very good!" exclaimed the Rexanian. Then, as if coming suddenly to a determination, he continued, "Will you kindly dismiss my carriage? I will walk back to my hotel."

After Mrs. Strong and Kate had left the men to their *liqueurs* and cigars, Count Szalaki, as we shall continue to call him, turned to his host and asked:

"Are there many of my countrymen in New York, Mr. Strong?"

"I was telling my son about them before you arrived," answered Mr. Strong, whose curiosity was greatly excited by the episode that had just occurred. "There are a few hundred Rexanians on the East Side. By the way, I forgot to remind you, Ned, that our man Rudolph is from Rexopolis. It slipped my mind at the moment. You see, count, I have dabbled a little in politics. After an election a few years ago, a Rexanian who had made some political speeches for us on the East Side applied to me for work. It happened that I wanted a man to

live in the lodge of our old homestead up in Westchester, and I gave Rudolph the place."

"He has served you well?" asked Count Szalaki, whose manner still gave slight evidences of suppressed excitement.

"He has been very faithful. He drinks a little too much brandy now and then, I believe, but he is well fitted for his not very onerous duties. You see, our old homestead —I was born there, as my grandfather and father were before me—has been allowed to fall into disuse. My family have always preferred Newport to Westchester in summer, and I have never had the heart to sell the place. Rudolph's duty is to take care of the house and grounds, and mine to resist all temptation to sell them."

"I am glad," remarked Count Szalaki, courteously, "that one of my people has been of service to you. But tell me about these few hundred Rexanians on the East Side. Are they quiet, reputable citizens? Do they give you any trouble?"

"They are considered, I believe," answered Mr. Strong, carefully weighing his words, "very industrious and law-abiding men; rather clannish, but great enthusiasts regarding our form of government."

Count Szalaki sipped his Chartreuse meditatively. He had a decision to make that seemed to him to be of great moment. He was placed in a very awkard position. The fact that there were men in the city who knew his name and his rank had come to him as a stunning blow. It had been a great relief to him to get away from Rexopolis, a hotbed of intrigue and peril, and to find himself in a great city in which, as he had fondly

believed, he could come and go without a thought of danger or the necessity of using any especial precautions. And now in the twinkling of an eye he had been confronted by a mystery and a menace. He felt a curious sensation of utter helplessness, a desire for advice, and the certainty that there was no one who could give it to him. Young though he was, he was a man of great physical and moral courage, but he was also a youth of strong imaginative powers, and the position in which he was now placed appeared to his overwrought mind to be filled with lurking perils against which he could think of no way to protect himself. Then his mind dwelt upon the kind and loyal words of the note that he had just received, and he felt impelled to put his trust in those who had sent it to him. The people of Rexania had always been fond of the crown prince: when he had appeared to the crowds in Rexopolis the cheers had ever been heartfelt and inspiring, and the youth felt sure that the mass of his people loved him. But there were schemers and rebels among them, as he well knew, and the feeling had been upon him for years that at any moment he might meet with a violent death. It was to get a few months' relief from this oppressive sensation that he had come to the New World. It was, therefore, a bitter disappointment to find that even in the land of universal freedom the heir to a throne may be shadowed by those who know his secret and who may or may not desire his destruction.

If Count Szalaki had been a man of wider experience, if he had realized that conditions prevailing in Rexopolis were impossible in

New York, he would have taken steps at this crisis that would have solved his difficulties at little or no risk to himself. A frank statement of the whole affair to Gerald Strong would have placed the Rexanian prince in perfect touch with his novel environment. It would have enabled him to remove the annoyances that threatened him as easily as the wind puts a fog to flight. But he kept his secret to himself, and thus made his first great blunder in a series of missteps that were followed by consequences affecting a vast multitude in Europe and a good many people on this side of the Atlantic.

As they rejoined Mrs. Strong and her daughter in the drawing-room, the Rexanian made a great effort to throw off the depression that had affected his spirits while he puffed his cigar.

"You look more cheerful, Count Szalaki," remarked Kate, sympathetically. "I hope you have received no bad news?"

"Not at all," he answered, with forced gayety. "A friend is awaiting me outside to walk to my hotel with me; and I fear that he is a bore."

"How very sad!" commented Kate, while the feeling crept over her that here was a man who had about him a great mystery. It was the one thing lacking to make him irresistibly fascinating to a girl who was surfeited with men about whom there was nothing new to learn.

"Perhaps," went on the Rexanian, brushing the dark locks back from his forehead with a white, tapering hand, "perhaps you will take pity on me, Miss Strong, and give me courage for my walk to-night by the prospect of a stroll with you to-morrow afternoon?"

He was not quite sure that, even in the land of liberty, this proposition would be considered good form, but his mood had grown somewhat reckless under the pressure of events.

"Thank you," answered Kate, frankly. "It will give me great pleasure to show you something of our city. I shall expect you about three o'clock." She held out her hand to him as he arose to make his adieux.

Ned Strong had succumbed, as had his parents and sister, to the magnetism of their guest.

"I should be pleased to look you up tomorrow morning, Count Szalaki," he said cordially. "If you are fond of driving, I'll stop at the hotel with my cart before noon."

"That is very charming," cried the Rexanian. "You have all been so kind to me. I cannot find terms in which to express my gratitude." The hand-clasp he gave his host and hostess proved the sincerity of his words.

He was gone, and Ned Strong stood looking at his sister.

"You promised me, Kate,' he said playfully, "that you would tell me what you thought of him. Now is the appointed time."

"I think," answered Kate, slowly, "I think, Ned, that Count Szalaki is a delightful man—who is in very great trouble."

"Kate is right, Gerald," commented Mrs. Strong, looking at her husband. "What do you suppose that note said?"

"I can't imagine," answered Gerald Strong, musingly. "I shall cable our agent at Vienna in the morning to go to Rexopolis and find out who Count Szalaki is."

CHAPTER V.

At seven o'clock that evening Posadowski and Posnovitch had entered an elevated car at Houston Street, bound up-town. They were dressed with more regard for appearances than usual. On their faces was an expression of suppressed excitement, and their gestures, as they talked earnestly in their native tongue, indicated that they had a grave matter under discussion.

"I will tell you all that I have done," said Posadowski, after they were seated. "Part of it you know. You have fixed Rudolph, and the house is ready for us. Did he give you much trouble?"

"No," answered Posnovitch. "Give Rudolph plenty of liquor, a little money, and appeal to his patriotism, and he is an easy tool to handle."

"Good!" returned Posadowski. "Now I have sworn in fifteen men who have agreed to devote their time for the next few weeks to this matter. Eight of them went up to Rudolph's place at six o'clock. At four o'clock to-morrow morning they will be relieved by the others. I have arranged the shifts so that the work will be easy for all of us."

"But how," asked Posnovitch, eagerly, "will you get the prince to leave the house alone?"

"I know the man," answered Posadowski. "I am depending upon his pride and the fact that he will not dare to make a confidant of any one of his new friends."

"How did you learn where he was going to dine?"

"That was not difficult," answered Posadowski modestly. "I heard him tell the clerk at his hotel this afternoon to send any cable despatch that came for him this evening to No. — Fifth Avenue. I telegraphed Rukacs, in cipher, to watch the house and to have the carriage ready for us. Svolak—I swore him in this morning—will be on the box alone. There is only one thing now that can defeat our scheme."

"And that is——?" asked the gigantic Rexanian, eagerly.

"The refusal of the prince to look upon us as friends."

"He will be suspicious, of course. And we can't use violence on Fifth Avenue in the early evening."

Posadowski smiled confidently. Taking a letter from his pocket, he handed it to his companion. It was a short note, addressed to "My Good Friend Posadowski," signed by the King of Rexania, and expressing the gratitude of the writer for services performed by the recipient.

"It is easily explained," remarked the arch-conspirator. "My brother, you know, was a loyalist. He did the king many good turns in the days of the revolution. When my brother died, his effects were sent to me; I found this letter among them. The Rexanian officials on the border are sometimes very careless. Of course I have always taken good

care of this epistle. I had a feeling that it would be of value to me some time or other. I am inclined to think that the success of our plans to-night rests on the king's signature."

"You heard from the palace to-day?"

"A short cable despatch in cipher. The king is restless; his physicians are worried about him."

"Good!" cried Posnovitch. "I think they have good cause to be. Both he and his kingdom are on their last legs."

When the train reached Forty-seventh Street the two Rexanians made a hasty exit and hurried down the stairs. It was a hot, close night in September. Somehow the summer, dissatisfied with its career, had impinged upon the fall and was now engaged in maliciously breaking a record. The sky was overhung with heavy clouds, and now and then a flash of lightning glared through the streets.

Posadowski and his towering companion turned up Fifth Avenue, and after a short walk were accosted by Rukacs. Pointing to a house just opposite to where they stood, he said, with a tremor of excitement in his voice:

"There's where he is dining. He has been in there over an hour."

"Good!" cried Posadowski. "Wait here until I rejoin you."

Crossing the street, the Rexanian mounted the steps of Gerald Strong's mansion, rang the bell, and, after a short discussion with the attendant, left in his hands the note that informed the prince that friends awaited him outside—a note that, as we know, he received and acted upon.

When he returned to the sidewalk, Posadowski, noting carefully that he was not being watched from the house, approached the carriage that was awaiting the prince's exit.

"Listen, Svolak," he said to the liveried driver, who had dismounted from the box. "If you are dismissed by an order from the house, drive off and station yourself by that corner light, half a block down the street. Wait there until you get another order from me. Understand me?"

"Thoroughly," answered Svolak, remounting the box.

A moment later Posadowski had rejoined Posnovitch and Rukacs on the opposite side of the street. The front door of the house opened; the hall attendant ran down the steps and gave an order to Svolak. The carriage rattled over the noisy pavement and made its way down-town.

"All goes well, my brothers," cried Posadowski, joyfully. "If he leaves that house alone, no power on earth can save the kingdom of Rexania from destruction. Never before in the history of the world did the birth of a republic depend upon whether a guest left his host in company or alone. But that is just how the crisis stands at this moment. I have played the whole game on the chance that the prince will not care to have his new friends learn his secret. I believe that he will come out to us alone. If he does, success is in our hands. If he doesn't, we must wait for another chance."

Time went by: the conspirators grew restless and impatient. So much was at stake on the opening of the front door of a Fifth

Avenue mansion that they were appalled by the possibilities suggested by the line of thought Posadowski had struck out. It was not too much to say that peace or war in Europe might depend upon the details of the next exit that should take place through the entrance that glared at them across the street.

Suddenly Posadowski clutched Rukacs' arm. "Here he comes," he whispered. "Walk down toward the carriage. I will join him at once. Let me do the talking. You can put in a word of loyalty at first, but keep quiet after that. Go!"

On the steps opposite to them stood the prince, gazing up and down the street, as the door closed behind him. There for a moment he paused, the incarnation of an anachronism, a youth who had failed to conceal his awful crime of being born a king. For that one moment he stood, poised on the brink of a precipice, while Reaction and Progress trembled in the balance. Then slowly he descended the steps and found himself face to face with Posadowski. As he scanned his fellow-countryman searchingly, the Crown Prince of Rexania felt reassured.

"Let us walk down the avenue together," said Posadowski, quietly, purposely avoiding the young man's title. "I have much to say to you, and friends await us down the street."

For one moment the prince hesitated: his eyes sought the house he had just left, as though the mansion contained something from which he had no wish to part. Then he turned and accompanied Posadowski down the avenue.

CHAPTER VI.

"THESE men are your friends and know your secret," whispered Posadowski to the prince, as they approached Rukacs and Posnovitch, who were standing boldly in the glare of an electric light by the side of the carriage.

He who called himself Count Szalaki was somewhat paler than usual, but his step was firm, and there was that in his bearing that caused a pang of regret in the mind of his companion. It takes a very hardened conspirator to cast youth into captivity without a touch of remorse.

"Rukacs, Posnovitch," said Posadowski, in a low tone, as the quartette formed by the sidewalk's edge, "you know who this man is. What is our duty toward him."

"To protect him and defend him with our life-blood, when the need shall come," answered Rukacs and Posnovitch in concert.

Count Szalaki's dark eyes glowed with the effort he was making to search the souls of the men around him.

"What do you wish from me?" he asked haughtily, withdrawing himself from too close contact with his companions.

"We have no time to lose, your—your majesty," whispered Posadowski, impressively. "It is growing late. If you doubt our sincerity, a short drive will take us to my

rooms. We have in our possession letters and diagrams taken—to be frank with you—from certain of our countrymen living in this city. These documents will prove to you that a plan has been perfected that puts your life in peril."

"Why did you not bring the papers with you?" asked the prince suspiciously.

"It would have been a reckless thing to do," answered the gigantic Posnovitch.

Posadowski put up his hand deprecatingly.

"Allow me to explain," he said, in a firm voice. "We dare not let this evidence leave our hands. It would cost us our lives if your enemies found that we had betrayed them. And they are very keen-witted. They have placed you under surveillance at your hotel: if you examined these documents at your rooms they would know of it, and our efforts to protect you would be vain."

Count Szalaki's face wore an expression of bewilderment and uncertainty. He was frank and unsuspicious by nature, but the atmosphere of a court had done much to destroy that confidence in his fellow-man that pertained to his temperament and his years. The men surrounding him impresed him favorably. They seemed to him to belong to that class of Rexanians—merchants and men of affairs who desired no change in the government—who had always been in Rexopolis the firmest friends of his house. But he hesitated to put himself in their power. In a strange land, surrounded by customs and conditions with which he was unfamiliar, he began to feel that he might be in even greater peril than that which surrounded him at all times in the palace at Rexopolis.

It was simply a choice between two evils that confronted him, and he had about decided to defy the danger which, he had been told, menaced him from a general conspiracy, rather than place himself in a closed carriage with the bewhiskered men at his side, when Posadowski, observing the prince's indecision, said:

"It is not surprising, your royal highness, that you find yourself in a quandary. We say that we are your friends. That is no proof that we tell the truth. But time is precious. We can wait no longer. I will convince you on the instant that you can trust us."

The arch-conspirator drew a letter from a pocket in his coat.

"One moment," he said, moving nearer to the light, with the letter in his hand. "Is there anything familiar to you in my face?"

The youth from whose grasp a throne was slipping glanced keenly at Posadowski's countenance.

"Truly," he said, "I seem to have seen your face before. Your name is——?"

"Posadowski," answered the Rexanian.

A puzzled expression crossed the prince's face. "I thought," he said musingly, "that Posadowski died."

"I did not die," cried the other. "I left Rexania and came to this city. Time presses. Here is a letter to me from your father. It will prove to you that I have always been, as I am to-night, loyal to you and to your house."

The prince seized the letter that Posadowski had read to Posnovitch in the elevated train.

"It is enough," he exclaimed, smiling cordially as he returned the epistle to Posadowski. "I believe that you are my friends. If you play me false, great will be your punishment. If you are true—and I think you are—your reward shall be worthy of my father. Come! Let us go."

With a countenance that showed intense relief and a light heart that beat with pleasure at the sight in that distant land of his father's signature, the prince entered the carriage. He was followed by Posnovitch and Posadowski, who took the seat opposite to the crown prince. Rukacs mounted the box beside Svolak. The latter, turning his horses around, hit them a clip with the whip, and the vehicle bounded at a rapid rate up the avenue.

There was silence inside for a time. Finally the prince, taking out his cigar-case, offered it to the men in front of him. Posadowski refused to smoke, but Posnovitch and the prince at once began to fill the vehicle with the fumes of tobacco. The latter felt the need of something to quiet his overwrought nerves. He found himself in a curious state of mind. Fully did he realize that it was incumbent upon him to keep his attention fixed upon his companions and his surroundings, for the position in which he was placed had revived the suspicions that had beset him before he had read his father's note. But, try as he might, his will refused to direct the current of his thoughts. He found himself dwelling with strange pleasure on the events of the evening. The face of Kate Strong, with its clear-cut features, brilliant eyes, and a golden glory of waving

hair, smiled at him in the darkness and made him impatient of the night. He had come to America to study politics; he found his whole heart and mind engrossed with a girl he had seen but once, and whom the conditions of his birth placed as far out of his reach as if he had been born an African slave. The prerogatives of royalty seemed to him at that moment to be worthless. That he must wed for policy, not for love, he well knew, and a spirit of rebellion against the hard fate that had made him a crown prince arose in his soul. He puffed his cigar nervously as the thought forced itself upon him that, while a duke might marry an Amerian girl, a king could not. His romantic face grew melancholy as his revery became more sombre. The air was oppressive, and distant thunder added to the dismal influences surrounding him.

Suddenly the prince aroused himself. Pulling out his watch, he saw that the hour was late. The carriage at that moment was crossing a long bridge, and the youth caught the gleam of lightning as it was reflected from the water beneath them. His forebodings instantly reawakened. The carriage had left the bridge behind it, as the prince placed his hand on the knob of the door and said sternly to the silent conspirators before him:

"Stop the carriage. I wish to talk to you before we go farther."

A revolver in the firm grasp of Posadowski gleamed, as the lightning flashed again, and the prince heard a harsh voice say to him:

"Be quiet! Make another motion, and there will be one king less in the world. Do you understand—now?"

CHAPTER VII.

SURROUNDED by trees and haughtily succumbing to decay, an ancient mansion, colonial in style, stands half-way between the shore of Long Island Sound and the old post-road to Boston, not many miles from Harlem Bridge. On the most brilliant day it is a gloomy, ghostly-looking structure, and the weed-choked grounds surrounding the house add to the unattractiveness of a spot that was once pleasing to the eye and noted for the elegance of the hospitality dispensed by those who made the old brick homestead a cheery place to visit. The house is built on a generous plan. A wide piazza, supporting white Corinthian columns, faces the lawn. At the back of the house, jutting out from the second story, is a large balcony commanding a magnificent view of the Sound. Inside the structure wide halls, enormous drawing-rooms, a stately dining-apartment, and, upstairs, a labyrinth of airy sleeping-rooms, prove that their former occupants were fond of luxury. The furniture has fallen to pieces, the hangings are worn and dusty, and the partially dismantled house seems to breathe a protest in every nook and corner against the negligence that has allowed its former glories to lose their lustre beneath the iconoclastic hand of time.

It was an especially dreary place at the

moment at which it demands our attention. Surrounded by a high wall, nothing can be seen of the house from the main road but its sloping roof and the gable windows beneath it. At the side of the large gateway that makes an entrance for the carriage-path leading up to the mansion is a small cottage that serves as a modest lodging for the Rexanian, Rudolph Smolenski, in whose charge the Strongs' homestead had been placed some years previous to the opening of this story.

It is one o'clock in the morning. The day has made a tempestuous entrance. Lightning flashes across the waters of the Sound, and deep peals of thunder make the ground tremble with their force. The rain, after long delay, has come at last, and beats down upon the mansion and the lodge as though it would wash them clean of all relics of the past. It leaks through cracks that time has made, and adds to the moist discomfort of rooms that are never wholly dry. But there are unwonted signs of cheer in the mansion and at the lodge. There are gleams of moving lights that meet the storm as it beats against the shuttered windows of the old house, and a steady ray defeats the darkness in front of the decaying lodge.

Let us enter the smaller structure first. Two men are seated at a table in the front room on the ground floor. An oil lamp dimly illuminates the barely furnished apartment and casts weird shadows across the uncarpeted floor. One of these men we have met before. It is the impetuous little Ludovics, whose patriotism is as indiscreet as it is enthusiastic. His bright, beady eyes gleam in

the half light; his thin face is flushed, partially from excitement, but in a larger degree from the brandy he has drunk.

His companion is Rudolph, the lodge-keeper, a flabby-faced, thickset man, with heavy features and the look of one who enjoys soft places and hard liquor. They are bending forward, listening.

"It's queer they don't come," Rudolph remarked, musingly. "I hear no sound of wheels. Here, man, have another drop to keep you awake." He filled Ludovics' glass from the bottle, and then replenished his own. Rudolph drank like one who needs renewed vigor, Ludovics like a man trying to quench the fires of impatience.

"I hope," said the latter, looking searchingly at Rudolph, "that they haven't got too much of this stuff up at the house."

"Only one bottle, this size," answered Rudolph, fingering the bottle lovingly. "One quart won't do much harm among five men. And they'll need it, I tell you. That old house takes water like a sponge on a night like this. I've done what I could to make it comfortable for you all, but I wasn't prepared for a flood like this."

"Hark," cried Ludovics nervously, turning an ear to the window: "I thought I heard wheels."

"They're in your head, Ludovics," remarked Rudolph, jocosely. He had picked up a good deal of slang from the Westchester urchins who haunted the lodge gate. "Come, light a cigar. In a storm like this it's a hard drive after they leave the bridge. I don't expect them for an hour yet."

They puffed in silence for a time. Finally

Ludovics said, with suppressed excitement in his voice:

"Rudolph, you're a man of sense, and you love the cause. Do you realize the full significance of this night's work?"

The lodge-keeper turned his puffy, pallid face full toward his guest and eyed him keenly.

"No, Ludovics; and nobody does. It'll probably cost me my job."

Ludovics waved his hand impatiently.

"I don't mean that. If we are cautious, I don't see how you can get into trouble. What I mean is this: we are to have the whole political future of our fatherland, the fate of dear old Rexania, right here in our grasp. No power on earth can despoil us of our absolute grip upon a nation's destiny so long as the crown prince is within our control. It is an awful responsibility that comes to us to-night, Rudolph."

The speaker glanced searchingly at his companion. He would have given a great deal to know how much of an impression he was making on the phlegmatic Rexanian, who continued to drink brandy without growing one whit more demonstrative. Finally Rudolph said, as a tremendous crash of thunder died away in bounding echoes across the Sound:

"What are you driving at, Ludovics? Can't you leave the brunt of the business to Posadowski?"

The excitable little Rexanian controlled his agitation with an effort. "He's so damned conservative, Rudolph!" he cried. "I believe he thinks he can persuade Prince Carlo to abdicate, even if the king does not die while

his heir-apparent is cooped up here." Then he jumped from his chair and strode nervously up and down the room. "It's all nonsense! Trying to compromise with a monarchy is like giving your wife your purse: you get the leather back and she keeps the money. Rudolph,"—and here the little man stood still and glanced piercingly at his companion—"no monarchy in Europe can be turned into a republic unless somebody, somewhere, uses heroic measures."

The lodge-keeper smiled cautiously.

"Don't you call kidnapping a traveller in this part of the world using heroic measures?"

Ludovics flushed angrily. "Only fools," he cried, "use heroic measures that are not quite heroic enough. Don't be stupid, Rudolph. You understand me. Pish! how I hate half-baked patriots! We'd have won our fight ten years ago, if we hadn't had among us men who didn't dare take advantage of the power they had grasped. The Rexanian republic must never be lost again because we revolutionists aren't equal to the crisis that confronts us. Do you think," he cried, again standing in front of Rudolph and gesticulating wildly, "do you think I care for my liberty or my life if I can do something that will give my country freedom? I hate all kings, Rudolph. Who dare say to me that a king deserves mercy at my hands? Did not a king kill my father and banish me from the land of my birth? Did not a king seize my patrimony and leave me a pauper, an outcast, a man without a country and without a hope? Mercy? I would sooner give meat to a dog that bit my shins than

grant life to a king whose breast was at my dagger's end. Do you know me now, Rudolph? Do you read my heart? I tell you, man, the night outside is not blacker than my soul when I think of kings. Kings! Kings! They say God made them! Then, by God, the devil shall destroy them. Give me more brandy, Rudolph. The storm is working in my blood! Ha, but that was a glorious flash! The sky's own fireworks light the coming of our prince to our little dove-cot."

A wild crash of thunder seemed to applaud the madman's words.

"Keep quiet," cried Rudolph, jumping up and placing his fat, yellowish hand on Ludovics' arm. "I hear the sound of wheels. Yes, yes, man, I am right. They are here."

A carriage stopped outside, and a blow that echoed through the cottage fell on the iron gate that blocked the roadway.

CHAPTER VIII.

"Go back to the city at once, and report here to-morrow afternoon at four o'clock," said Posadowski to Svolak, the gate having been opened by Rudolph and the carriage drawn up in front of the lodge.

The arch-conspirator had left Posnovitch to guard the crown prince inside the vehicle.

"Who is with you?" he asked hastily of Rudolph, as he placed his hand on the handle of the carriage door.

"Ludovics," whispered the lodge-keeper, very softly. "Look out for him. He is drunk and desperate."

A few moments later the four Rexanians—Posadowski, Posnovitch, Rudolph, and Ludovics—surrounded Prince Carlo in the parlor of the lodge. The prince's face was pale, but his mouth bore a determined expression and his gleaming eyes did not flinch as he gazed searchingly at his captors in the dim light of the inhospitable apartment.

"I repeat, your royal highness," said Posadowski, impressively, "that you are among friends or enemies as you choose to make us. We are your friends if you will conform readily to our wishes. We are your enemies if you offer resistance."

"Milk and water," muttered Ludovics sullenly. Posadowski glanced angrily at the overwrought revolutionist, but said nothing.

"I am to understand," remarked the prince,

haughtily, "that I am your prisoner, and that I can obtain my freedom only under certain conditions."

"Precisely," answered Posadowski. "Those conditions we will outline to you to-morrow. Rudolph, is his highness' apartment ready for him?"

"Yes; we will go up to the house at once, if you wish." The lodge-keeper walked to a window and looked out into the night. "The rain has ceased," he said. Approaching Prince Carlo, he asked, with marked deference, "May I offer you some brandy? You have had a hard ride, your highness."

The prince hesitated. He felt cold, and a depression of spirits that had not affected him in the carriage overcame him at this moment. Courteous as these men were to him, he realized that they were determined and dangerous characters, the ringleaders in a revolt that, ten years before, had made them exiles. That they would take every advantage of the opportunity that chance and his own short-sightedness had thrown in their way he well knew. But of all the dismal influences that surrounded him there was none that affected him so unpleasantly as little Ludovics' gaze. He could not escape it. Whichever way he turned his face, he realized that the piercing eyes of the undersized Rexanian were upon him, pitiless, revengeful, unflinching. Meeting Ludovics' glance as Rudolph held out to him a glass half-full of brandy, a chill more penetrating than any he had ever felt struck to the prince's marrow, and he drained the liquor eagerly. His hand trembled slightly as he returned the glass to Rudolph.

"Before we leave this place," said Posadowski, drawing nearer to his captive and speaking sternly, "you must understand that you are absolutely powerless. The guard around you night and day will render escape impossible. The house to which we go at once has long been deserted, and none but a few tradesmen ever visit this lodge. An exile in Siberia is no farther removed from outside aid than are you, Prince Carlo of Rexania. But do not imagine for an instant that your life is in the slightest danger. You are surrounded by your own countrymen, by those who admire you personally, while they detest the institutions you represent—institutions that, I can well imagine, a man of your age and intelligence cannot, in his heart of hearts, uphold."

The pale cheeks of the captive prince turned red at these words. He drew himself up arrogantly, and the spirit of a regal ancestry gleamed in his dark eyes as they rested defiantly upon the first man who had ever dared to question his loyalty to monarchy.

"Have done!" he cried, imperiously. "Powerless though I may be, there are words on your lips that I must refuse to hear."

"Coward! coward!" shrieked Ludovics. "A king is always a coward! You're afraid of the truth! Coward! Coward!"

The gigantic Posnovitch placed his hand over the dwarfish drunkard's mouth.

"Put him to bed, and keep him there, Posnovitch," cried Posadowski savagely. "If he makes any noise thrash him. Come, Rudolph, we will conduct Prince Carlo to his room."

Ludovics glared madly at Posadowski. Twisting, with an agility begotten by alcoholic stimulants, out of the grasp of Posnovitch, he made a dash for the table, and, seizing the brandy bottle, would have dashed it against the head of the crown prince if Rudolph had not stayed his murderous hand at the last moment.

"We leave him to you," said the lodge-keeper, stolidly, as he placed the struggling Ludovics in the grip of Posnovitch again. "Don't let him play you the same trick twice."

With Posadowski on one side of him and Rudolph on the other side, Prince Carlo left the lodge and turned his weary steps toward the gloomy house at the end of the driveway. The rain no longer fell, but the night was black and oppressive, and now and again the lightning gleamed fitfully across the distant waters of the sound. There was no invigoration in the atmosphere. The storm had left in its trail a moisture that seemed to take uncanny pleasure in emphasizing the heat. But, in spite of all this, Prince Carlo felt again that grewsome sensation of cold that had affected his nerves in the rooms they had just left. As the trio mounted the broad steps that led to the piazza, beneath which gloomy shadows lurked, this feeling of chilliness increased, and it was only by a strong effort of will that he saved himself from trembling beneath the grasp of his conductors.

Three men met them at the main entrance. "Silence!" cried Posadowski to the Rexanians in the hall-way. "Two of you remain here. We will go up-stairs at once."

One of the conspirators stalked up the broad staircase in front of the prince and his companions. A lamp gleamed dimly at the landing, and, grasping it as he turned into the upper hall-way, their conductor led them through a doorway into a large, gloomy sleeping-room at the rear of the house. The apartment exhibited signs of long disuse, disguised in part by a hasty attempt to make it inhabitable. The old-fashioned bed was made up with linen furnished by the lodge-keeper. The faded hangings in front of the windows had been pulled back to conceal their tattered condition, and, had it not been for the damp and heavy atmosphere of the room, it would have presented many welcome features to a very weary man.

"Here we leave you, Prince Carlo," remarked Posadowski, in a low voice. "If our hospitality is lacking in luxuries, believe me, it is not our fault. I assure you it is my sincere hope that you will rest well; for there are weighty matters to be decided between us to-morrow. Good-night, your royal highness; good-night."

Prince Carlo bent his head slightly in recognition of the arch-conspirator's last words, and on the instant found himself alone. The sound of a closing door and of a key turned in the old-fashioned lock echoed drearily through the house as the prince stepped hurriedly to one of the windows and attempted to raise it to air the room. The window was locked. What it meant to be a prisoner broke darkly upon the young man's mind, and he threw himself in despair upon the bed and moaned in utter misery.

CHAPTER IX.

On the second morning after the crown prince's abduction, Gerald Strong and his family formed themselves at breakfast into what Ned called "a committee of the whole on the Szalaki matter."

"I received a cable dispatch late yesterday afternoon, dated at Rexopolis, and signed by our Vienna agent," remarked Strong the elder, glancing rather shamefacedly at Kate. "It ran as follows: 'Szalaki common name. No nobility.' I begin to fear that your mother and I were too easily affected by pleasing manners and a handsome face."

"The thing looks queer," exclaimed Ned, emphatically. "When I drove up to the hotel yesterday before noon a curious feeling came over me that I would not find the count. When I asked for him at the desk, a peculiar expression rested on the clerk's face, and he looked at me suspiciously. When I had given him my name, he seemed to feel more confidence in me, for he told me that Count Szalaki had not returned to the hotel the night before. About an hour before I reached there yesterday morning a man had given the clerk a note from Count Szalaki, enclosing the amount of his bill and directing the hotel people to put all his belongings in the care of the bearer. The man looked like a foreigner. The clerk carefully com-

pared the count's signature on the note with his name on the hotel register, and became satisfied that they were penned by the same hand. There was nothing for him to do, of course, but to obey the orders contained in the note. I tell you, father, it looks queer."

Kate Strong had said nothing after seating herself at the table, but her face showed that she was intensely interested in the conversation going on between her father and her brother. Her cheeks were paler than usual, and dark shadows rested beneath her eyes. She ate nothing, and sipped her coffee languidly. Ned's emphatic insistence on the "queerness" of the whole affair seemed to annoy her, for she exclaimed, a slight tinge of red appearing in her face:

"I don't believe, Ned, that Count Szalaki is a fraud. It's strange, of course, that he sent me no word of apology for not keeping his engagement; but, somehow, I feel sure that there is an adequate explanation for his silence."

"But you forget your father's cable dispatch, Kate," remarked Mrs. Strong, coldly. She suffered intensely at the idea that her boasted knowledge of human nature had been insufficient to protect the family from an impostor.

"Well, well," exclaimed Gerald Strong, rather testily, as he motioned to the butler to hand him a morning newspaper, "no great harm is done even if Count Szalaki is not what he appeared to be. If he is an adventurer, we certainly got off very cheaply."

Kate Strong did not wholy agree with her father in this conclusion. She was dissatisfied with herself, and weary for the moment, of

her environment. Whatever Count Szalaki might be—confidence man, rolling stone, conspirator, or what not—she felt that he had played a more important *rôle* in her eyes than either he or her family realized. How could Count Szalaki or her people know that this self-contained, worldly-wise, seemingly unimpressionable New York girl, who had been flattered and petted and obeyed since her nursery days, had found in the Rexanian the incarnation of her secret dreams of romance? How could they realize that the very mystery that placed him beyond the pale of Gerald Strong's consideration had but added to the fascination that his memory exerted over the girl? Kate was not by temperament a sickly sentimental woman, but she was not yet too old or world-worn to dream wild, sweet dreams, and to long for the day when out of the shadowland of commonplace would come a royal youth who would lead her up to the sun-kissed palace of love and mystery that crowns the distant mountain-top. She had seen Count Szalaki but once, but in the beauty of his face and the soft, almost caressing accent of his voice she had found reason for the hope that her dreams might not be mockeries, that in the land of reality there might be a prince who, kissing the lips of the sleeping maiden, would awaken her to a life that should satisfy the longings of her weary soul. All this she hardly dared to admit to herself, but she was honest enough in her self-communion to acknowledge that Count Szalaki appealed to her imagination as no man heretofore had touched it. It hurt her pride to feel that her parents and brother had relegated this visitor

from her land of dreams to the limbo in which honest people placed impostors. As she mused silently on the accusing fact that had been brought to her notice regarding the youth who fulfilled in so many details her ideal, an exclamation of surprise from her father aroused her from her revery.

"Here's a long despatch in the *Trumpet* from Rexopolis," exclaimed Gerald Strong, glancing at his son. "Listen. 'There is much suppressed excitement in this city. The guards at the palace have been doubled, and rumor has it that King Sergius III. is dangerously ill. Premier Fejeravy was seen by your correspondent to-day, but refused to admit or deny the truth of the report. One of the astonishing features of the situation lies in the fact that the Crown Prince Carlo has not appeared in public for some time past. It has been his custom heretofore to show himself to the people whenever his aged father was indisposed. This has been good policy on his part, as he is very popular, and there is always talk of a revolutionary outbreak here when the king is threatened with death. The maintenance of the monarchy, if King Sergius should die, rests entirely on the popularity of Prince Carlo, as the undercurrent of feeling in favor of a republic is very strong. It is suspected that France and Russia would not be opposed to the overthrow of the reigning house and the formation of a Rexanian republic. There are many reasons why a buffer republic at this point would be of advantage to the Franco-Russian coalition. The Rexanian army has been greatly strengthened of late years, but its loyalty to the crown is under

suspicion. There is little doubt that a large number of the rank and file, and a few of the officers, are under the influence of republican ideas. Under these conditions, every scrap of news from the palace is eagerly awaited by the crowd in the streets. It is rumored at this writing that a famous specialist from Paris has just reached the city and is being hurried to the king's bedside. Business is practically at a standstill, and any moment may give birth to events in this city that will affect the whole of Europe.'"

There was silence for a moment. At length Ned remarked:

"I can't make anything out of it, father. I am free to admit that Count Szalaki impressed me as a thorough gentleman, too young and unsophisticated to be a dangerous schemer. But he comes to us, and while here receives a note that affects him strangely. Then he disappears, leaving no word of apology or explanation behind him. And now we learn that his country is on the eve of startling events. He told us that he came here to study our institutions. By Jove, I have it, father! He is a revolutionist, and the crisis at Rexopolis has called him back at once. I'll bet a penny that he sailed for Europe yesterday morning!"

Gerald Strong rose, and remarked, indifferently:

"Well, well, Ned, you may be right. I should prefer to learn that he was a rebel and not a rascal. He was a charming boy. But I doubt if we ever hear of him again. You don't look well, Kate. You must get more exercise."

"I'm going up to the Country Club to-mor-

row with Ned," said Kate, smiling at her father as she left the table. "We will take a spin on our wheels and be back here for a late dinner. Isn't that our plan, Ned?"

"I believe it is," answered her brother. "And to-day I shall try to find out what has become of Count Szalaki."

The young man did not know that the expression on his sister's face was one of mingled gratitude and hope, born of the words he had just spoken.

CHAPTER X.

THE sun had peeped above the island to the eastward and was throwing its caressing rays across the Sound. The storm that had chastised the waters and grumbled its way inland had left a smiling daybreak in its track. The Crown Prince of Rexania still tossed in feverish sleep upon his bed upstairs as Posadowski and Posnovitch, who had obtained a short but thorough rest, stood behind the old manor house, looking out upon the golden shimmer that gilded the tossing waters of the Sound.

"There is only one way to deal with Ludovics," said Posadowski, emphatically. "There is a great risk in sending him back to the city, but I dare not keep him here. He's a murderous little man when in liquor, and our force is not large enough to keep a close watch upon him. Now, my plan is this. When the prince awakens, I will persuade him to write a note giving you authority to get his belongings at the hotel. He wouldn't be thoroughly comfortable here in evening dress. I will also put Ludovics in your charge. You must take him to the city and on your way down intimate that if he returns here he will be locked up, and if he plays us false in the city there are fourteen men each one of whom will swear to have his life. Do you understand me, Posnovitch? Good! Go and call him."

A few moments later Ludovics, pale and limp, felt the cool, morning air kissing his fevered cheeks. He stood before Posadowski trembling, repentant, and not quite clear in his mind. He vaguely realized that he had done something mutinous, but just what it was he could not remember.

"Ludovics," said Posadowski, sternly, "for the sake of the cause you love, it is best that you should accompany Posnovitch to the city. Don't return here until you get an order from me. Understand?"

The small man trembled with nervousness, and his eyes filled with tears.

"Forgive me," he whispered. "I forget what I did that annoyed you. I will hereafter do as you wish. Come, Posnovitch," he continued, meekly, "I am ready to go with you."

"There is no hurry," remarked Posadowski, more gently than he had spoken before. "Posnovitch will have to wait here until I get a note for him from the crown prince."

Ludovics' eyes gleamed as the name of the man he had attempted to brain with a bottle reached his ear. He gazed about him restlessly for a moment, and then said, earnestly:

"Yes, Posadowski, you are right. It is better that I should go back to New York."

At three o'clock in the afternoon of this day, the city editor of the *Trumpet* sent for a reporter named Norman Benedict, a discreet but energetic and ambitious youth, whose record in the office was high.

"Benedict," said the editor, "I want you to read this cable dispatch. I will give you your orders afterward."

He handed the reporter a proof of the despatch from Rexopolis that Gerald Strong on the following morning was to read to his family at the breakfast table.

"You can keep the proof for reference," said the city editor, as the young man glanced up from the despatch. "Now, I want you to get among the Rexanians on the East Side and interview those who are willing to talk. They may be close-mouthed, but they are a thirsty crowd, and by spending a little money on them you will be able to set their tongues a-wagging. Get your copy in early. I want to make as good a showing as possible on the city end of this Rexanian business."

Half an hour later, Norman Benedict was puffing a cigarette in the restaurant near St. Mark's Church, in which the reader first made the acquaintance of the Rexanian conspirators. It was not yet four o'clock, and the café was well-nigh deserted. In one corner of the room, however, sat Ludovics, sipping brandy and smoking cigars. He felt lonely, and an indistinct impression was upon him that somebody, somehow, had done him a great wrong. He had depended upon liquor to clear his brain and to restore him to a thorough comprehension of what had befallen him, but his constitution was not equal to a full reaction, and the more brandy he drank the more acute became his sense of wrong and his certainty as to the source and character of the injustice that had been done him. There were two ideas in his mind to which he clung tenaciously, and which, by persistent nourishing, had become to his distorted consciousness facts of great moment:

he had been ill-treated by a king, and that king was entertaining a few favored guests, with wild revelry, somewhere up in Westchester County.

"Pardon me," said Benedict, who suspected that Ludovics was a Rexanian, partially because of his presence in the restaurant, but in a larger degree on account of the little man's peculiar cast of countenance—"pardon me, but can you tell me where I can find somebody who is well acquainted with the city of Rexopolis?"

The reporter had crossed the café and seated himself at the table at which Ludovics preserved his wrongs in brandy. The disgraced conspirator glared at the youth suspiciously. Benedict's frank, smiling face disarmed distrust.

"Before you answer," went on the reporter, "permit me to order some fresh cigars, and—and—you are drinking?"

"Brandy," answered Ludovics, gratefully, for his supply of cash was beginning to get low.

"Very good!" cried Benedict. "Waiter, bring out a pint of your choicest cognac and half a dozen of your very best cigars."

Ludovics smiled cordially. He liked this open-handed youth.

"You are from Rexania?" asked Benedict, as he lighted a cigar and gazed earnestly at Ludovics' flushed face.

"Rexania!" cried the latter, hysterically. "Rexania! Of course I'm from Rexania. And, let me tell you, young man, I'm going back to Rexania. Did you say the king wouldn't let me? You lie, young man, you lie! He can't help it. How can a dead king

keep a live man out of his fatherland? Tell me that, will you?"

Ludovics paused and glanced around the deserted room suspiciously. Then he again turned his eyes to the sympathetic face of his companion. He vaguely felt that he should stop sipping liquor and keep his reckless tongue quiet, but he was in a mood that craved expression, and Benedict's cordial manner was very soothing to the overwrought Rexanian. The reporter had been successful in his profession from his power of allaying suspicion and inspiring confidence.

"But, my friend," suggested Benedict, quietly, "the king is not yet dead—though very ill."

Ludovics looked almost sober as he flashed an eager and inquiring glance at the young man.

"How do you know that? Have you heard from Rexopolis?"

Benedict did not reply for a moment. He was carefully weighing a bold step. Should he show this man the proof of the cable dispatch he carried with him? "He will be too drunk in an hour to sell the news to another paper, even if he knew the ropes well enough when sober," reflected Benedict, as he took the proof-slip from his coat and handed it to Ludovics.

The effect of the dispatch on the Rexanian astonished the reporter. The little man uttered a shout of triumph and then glanced anxiously around the room. Seizing his brandy-glass, he drained it to the bottom. Such glimmerings of common sense as had marked his conversation up to this point de-

serted him on the instant. His disordered mind fell back upon the idea that he had been wronged by a king, and that that king was holding high carnival up in Westchester County.

"Young man," he said, impressively, a wild gleam in his restless eyes, "I don't know who you are, but I'd trust you with my life. Listen!" He leaned forward across the table and placed a clammy hand on Benedict's arm. "Listen! I've been drinking too much: haven't I? Don't lie to me. I can see it in your face. I'm drunk, and you show it. That's queer, isn't it? But I could tell you something that would make you drunk and me sober. I'll try it. Bend nearer to me. They don't know in Rexania where the crown prince is. The king is dying. Damn him! let him die. Look here, boy, I'd kill all kings! Wouldn't you?"

The intoxicated Rexanian gazed suspiciously at Benedict.

"Of course I would," answered the reporter, heartily. A conviction had come upon him that the little drunkard had something in his mind that was not altogether an alcoholic hallucination.

"I knew you would," cried Ludovics, in delight. "You're not made of dough, like—like—well, never mind their names. But look here, boy, I need your help. There's a king up in Westchester—do you hear me—who tried to take my life."

Benedict began to fear that he had been wasting time and money to no purpose on this madcap foreigner, when the latter noting, with drunken slyness, the change of ex-

pression on the youth's face, felt that his pride had been hurt.

"You doubt my word, boy," he cried, angrily. "I don't know who you are, or what you mean by trying to find out what I mean. But I'm telling you the truth. We've got the Crown Prince of Rexania up in Westchester, and—and——" A look of horror crossed Ludovics' face as he realized what he had done. He trembled violently, and the tears poured down his cheeks.

"Let me have some more brandy," he implored, in a weak voice, but before the waiter could get it for him he had fallen forward on to the table and into a deep stupor.

Norman Benedict arose, and, giving the waiter a bill, directed him to see to it that the Rexanian was cared for until the next day, when he would look in upon him. Then he hastily left the restaurant and strode eagerly away. Whether he had received a newspaper "tip" of great value or only the dregs of a drunkard's mind he was not sure. But there had been something in the words and manner of the brandy-soaked Rexanian that strongly impressed Benedict with the idea that he could not afford wholly to neglect the hint that had been thrown out. The dispatch from Rexopolis said that the crown prince had not been seen for weeks. Benedict turned cold at the tremendous possibilities suggested by the thoughts that crowded through his brain.

"I'll abandon the interviews and run my risk," he finally decided. "My first step is to find out if there are any Rexanians living in Westchester County. That ought to be easy. I'll try the office first."

CHAPTER XI.

At the moment at which Norman Benedict had come to the decision recorded at the close of the preceding chapter, a ceremony unprecedented in the history of the New World had reached a crisis in Westchester County. Rudolph, the lodge-keeper, who was more thoroughly Americanized than his fellow-Rexanians—perhaps because of his long association with the stray urchins who haunted the lodge gate—had characterized this function to his fellow-conspirators as the "putting of a disorderly king through the third degree."

Rudolph's phrase, however, was not quite accurate, for Prince Carlo of Rexania, far from being disorderly, had become convinced, after thoroughly investigating his environment and weighing the possibility of escape, that his only hope lay in a diplomatic concession, for the time being, to his captors' wishes. It was not lack of courage and daring that had caused him to reach this conclusion. He possessed not only a bold heart but a clear head. But he fully realized that at the present stage of the game his opponents held all the trumps. Examining his belongings, after his luggage had reached his room, he found that all his money had been taken from him. Even the loose change that he had carried with him on the night of his

capture had been removed from his pockets while he slept.

Just how far he had been carried from New York he did not know. He realized clearly enough, however, that, without money and unacquainted with the customs of the country, he would be in a most embarrassing position even if he could elude his vigilant guards and escape to the city. He had sworn to his father to preserve his incognito, and to keep from Rexanian consular and diplomatic agents the knowledge of his absence from his native land. Prince Carlo was at heart a loyal reactionist, and, having pledged his royal word to his royal father, it never occurred to him that circumstances might arise that would make the breaking of his promise justifiable. He possessed a kingly regard for truth that was absurdly quixotic, and which hampered him in dealing with men who had had considerable experience in American politics.

Shortly after three o'clock on the afternoon that found Ludovics too loquacious and a newspaper reporter quite worthy of his profession, the balcony jutting out from Prince Carlo's sleeping apartments and overlooking the Sound served as a stage for a one-act melodrama that might find its place, perhaps as a curtain-raiser to a tragedy.

Kings there have been who sought the New World as an asylum from the dangers that surrounded them at home. Crowned heads in Europe have bowed in sorrow over events that have taken place on this side of the Atlantic. Wherever monarchs rule, the very name of America sends a shudder

through the palace that shakes the throne itself. But never before, in the strange, weird history of human progress, had a captive king gazed at the blue waters of Long Island Sound and listened to the burning words of those who denied his divine right to rule.

"It is well," said Posadowski, glancing kindly at Prince Carlo, who was seated in an old-fashioned easy-chair, around which the arch-conspirator and his colleagues, Posnovitch, Rukacs, and Rudolph, had grouped themselves, "it is well that we should come to an understanding as quickly as possible. And, before we go a step farther, let me reiterate and emphasize what I have told you once before, that there is not one of us here who does not feel kindly toward you as a man. We are determined that no harm shall befall your person. But we are bound, also, by another oath. You must know by this time what it is. We have sworn that you, Prince Carlo, shall never mount the throne of Rexania."

The youth, whose clear-cut face was pale and drawn, gazed musingly at the blue waters that grew gloriously cerulean as the autumnal sun crept westward. Brushing the black curling locks back from his troubled brow, he seemed to invoke the God of his fathers to give him strength in his hour of trial.

"What would you have me do?" he asked, firmly. "State clearly your wishes."

Posadowski's face was almost benignant, as his eyes rested sorrowfully on the disturbed countenance of the prince.

"I regret to tell you, Prince Carlo, that

your father is very dangerously ill," said the arch-conspirator, gently.

The young man sprang up from his seat in dismay.

"My God!" he cried, "can you find the heart to lie to me at such a time as this? My father, the king, is not ill. You are deceiving me, for some purpose I cannot grasp."

Posadowski drew himself up to his full height and gazed at the prince with wounded dignity.

"I do not lie to you, Prince Carlo," he said firmly, in a low voice. "I received a cable dispatch in cipher direct from the palace this morning."

Prince Carlo had sunk back into his chair, and was glancing feverishly from one Rexanian to another, seemingly in the hope that one of them would come to his aid and give the lie to Posadowski. But there was that in the faces and manner of the men surrounding him that slowly but surely impressed him with the conviction that he was not again a victim of subterfuge—that what Posadowski had told him was indeed the truth.

The youth's hand trembled and his cheeks burned as he felt the tears welling from his eyes. Recovering himself instantly, he gazed earnestly at Posadowski, as though he would read the man's very soul.

"Do you mean to tell me that you are in communication with the palace at Rexopolis?"

"I am," answered the arch-conspirator, simply. "I have been for some years past."

The prince forgot for a moment that he was anything but a son, soon to be fatherless, a son who had not been too loyal or obedient at the end.

"Tell me—tell me," he implored, "is there no hope? Are you sure?"

"There is no hope, Prince Carlo, unless a famous specialist from Paris can perform a miracle. To-morrow I shall know what this man has done for the king."

A sob broke from the overburdened heart of the youth, and tears of honest sympathy filled the eyes of his countrymen. Suddenly Prince Carlo sprang up, his face ghastly in its pallor and his eyes aglow with the fervor of his hope.

"You will let me go to him? My countrymen, for the love of God, for the love you bore your fathers, let me go to him! I must—I must see him before he dies."

Posadowski's lips trembled and his voice faltered, as he said, "We cannot let you go, Prince Carlo unless—unless——" His voice failed him.

"Unless what?" whispered the prince eagerly.

"Unless you will promise us to abdicate the instant your father dies."

A dazed look settled on the youth's face for an instant.

"Do you mean to tell me," he asked, hoarsely, "that you would take my word for such a thing as that?"

A murmur born of suppressed excitement, perhaps of protest, broke from the conspirators, but Posadowski raised his hand for silence.

"We would take your word, Prince Carlo.

There is not a Rexanian in all the world who would not."

The youth's face twitched with the effort he made to suppress the emotion of mingled astonishment and gratitude that filled his soul.

"And yet," he cried, "you would take from me my throne, deny my right to lead the people I love, who love me! What madness blinds your eyes? Would you bring ruin on the land you pretend to cherish? Think you that there is in Rexania a republican leader whose word you would accept as you would take mine? But I am too deeply grieved at the news you give me to argue with you now. Plain as your inconsistency is to my eyes, this is not the time to point it out to you. Please leave me for a while. I must think—think—think. Wait just one moment. Do not leave me with a false hope in your heart. Though my father—God be with him!—were dying a thousand deaths, I would not, could not, blindly sacrifice the trust that falls to my care to gratify your will, and gain my worthless freedom. Better for me, better for you, better for Rexania, that I sink beneath the waters of yonder sun-kissed sea than go hence a false and recreant prince, damned for all time as a traitor, a coward, a renegade. Leave me to my sorrow and my tears. Go, and may the God that loves our fatherland speak to your hard hearts and lead you from the error of your ways. Go!"

Silently the four conspirators turned and left Prince Carlo to his lonely grief. Their faces were pale with the conflicting emotions that tried their souls. The

gigantic Posnovitch trembled, as if with cold.

"He's grand," he muttered, as the quartette reached the lower hall. "He's every inch a king."

CHAPTER XII.

WILL the reader permit us to place him somewhere between earth and sky two days after the events recorded in the last chapter had occurred? From this exalted position, and provided, as he is, with far-seeing eyes, he must observe, with more or less interest, that the streets of Rexopolis, the capital of Rexania, are thronged with crowds of people who move hither and thither with a restlessness apparently due to constrained excitement that has not yet crystallized into any set purpose. Around the palace, he will notice, regiments of soldiers stand on guard, while, now and then, up or down the avenues of the well-laid-out city dash squadrons of light cavalry. The sight will suggest to him that Rexopolis, at the crisis at which he views it, represents a microcosm in which all that is characteristic of Old-World monarchies finds physical expression—a restless and discontented people, an army half-hearted in its defence of the palace and what that building represents, mystery and misrepresentation and misery inside the king's abode, and the wild mutterings of protest and warning outside the sacred precincts of an anachronistic cult.

But it strains the reader's eyes to look so far afield. Back across the wide blue expanse of the broad Atlantic his gaze returns, and straight beneath him he sees various peo-

ple who approach each other slowly, ignorant of the strange fact that the impending upheaval in a minor city of Europe is to have a marked influence upon their respective lives.

Behold Ludovics, the restless victim of too much patriotism and too little self-control, pausing in helpless hesitation outside the gateway of a road-house not many miles above Harlem Bridge. The afternoon has grown warm, and Ludovics has walked far and fast. Is it strange that he craves a stimulant?

Look forward, farther eastward. If your eye has not grown weary, you will observe that a youth and two women are seated on the piazza of the Country Club, engaged in the harmless occupation of discussing the adaptability of the weather and the roads to a spin on their wheels. Unless our impressions are deceptive, the youth is Ned Strong, and one of the women is his sister. You have not yet been introduced to their companion, Mrs. Brevoort, but surely you have heard of the beautiful widow who last season made herself famous on two continents by refusing to turn over to an English peer her fortune and her liberty. There are those who say that she was sufficiently eccentric to love her husband and to mourn him dead, but the impression has prevailed in the Westchester set of late that what an English duke failed to accomplish Ned Strong bids fair to compass.

Turning your gaze away from this attractive trio, after you have noted, perhaps, that an air of melancholy seems to surround the tall, lithe figure of Kate Strong, you will ob-

serve that Norman Benedict has just left a New York train at the New Rochelle station, and that his face bears an expression of suppressed excitement kept in check by a set purpose that may at any moment encounter insuperable obstacles. If you watch him a moment, you will see that he bargains with the driver of a light, open carriage, and, after making terms, enters the vehicle and is driven toward the Sound.

Has your eye grown weary? Surely Prince Carlo is worthy of a little optic effort on your part. See him seated on the balcony of the ramshackle old manor house, his cheek resting on his hand as he gazes mournfully across the restless waves of the Sound and wonders what passes in the palace at Rexopolis. Could he see, as we have seen, the restless populace, the armed guards, the busy cavalry, he would know that a crisis in the fate of his country is at hand, and the look of settled melancholy on his handsome face would change to an expression of mingled anger and despair. But Prince Carlo is young, and youth inclines to hope. The beauty of the scene that lies before him on this bracing autumnal afternoon is conducive to an optimistic mood, and, in spite of the seemingly desperate character of his position, the young man dreams rather of love than war, and the smiling face of a fair-haired American girl comes between him and the frowning countenance of red-scarred revolution.

Perhaps Prince Carlo is undergoing a temptation different from any that ever before assaulted a son of kings. It is possible that under the influence of a caressing environ-

ment, lulling his senses by the beauty of earth, and sea and sky and the gentle kisses of the warm south wind, he thinks with a shudder of the horrors that surround him in a palace far away, and longs for the peace that life in a land where it would be "always afternoon" would bestow. What if his father died and he, the crown prince, should never return to Rexania? What if, taking to his heart a wife who would be his queen in a kingdom where no traitors lurked, he should forever abandon the cares and perils that had made his father's existence one long nightmare, to which death alone could bring relief? It might be that the historians of his country would call him, in the years to come, a traitor to the cause he had been born into the world to uphold, the Judas Iscariot of age-end monarchy. But, for all that, his gain would be peace and love.

Prince Carlo's temptation was not a mere weighing of abstract propositions, nor even the natural inclination of an imaginative youth to take the flower-bedecked path of least resistance. There was an influence at work to make him subservient to the wishes of the men surrounding him that none of them suspected and that he himself only vaguely realized. How great an impression the few hours he had spent in Kate Strong's companionship had made upon him he was just beginning dimly to appreciate. He found himself practically unable to compel his mind to dwell for any great length of time on the weighty problems that were his to solve. He would discover, to his dismay, that while mentally in search of a path that would lead him in honor from the difficulties

that beset him, his mind obstinately refused to confine itself to his immediate environment and all that was involved therein, and would devote itself to reproducing for his delight the tones of a maiden's voice, the gleam of her eloquent eyes, the fascinations of her gestures and her smiles.

He upon whom rested the destinies of a nation—perhaps the future of institutions hallowed by time and claiming a divine origin—had become little more than a love-sick youth, gazing dreamily upon the heaving bosom of a landlocked sea and longing for the presence of the woman his young heart craved.

Thus beneath us have we seen a few of the countless millions upon whom the September sun shone down that day; and we know that in their comings and their goings they wove unconsciously that web of destiny whose warp and woof fashion the garment that hides the mystery of life.

CHAPTER XIII.

"WOMAN in bicycle costume is an acquired taste," Ned Strong had once remarked to a friend. That was before Mrs. Brevoort had taken to wheeling. She had converted him to a belief in the artistic possibilities of a bifurcated dress for women. He had come to the final conclusion that the desirability of a bicycle costume, so far as the gentler sex is concerned, must remain wholly a local issue. Experience was teaching him that generalizations regarding the progressive woman of to-day are worthless. Furthermore, he had learned that whether or not he admired their ways and costumes made little difference to the women of his set. The iconoclastic tendency of recent years finds no more striking illustration than in the fact that women no longer sacrifice their comfort to their dress for the sake of man's approval, but dare to be unconventional for the sake of their own comfort.

And Ned Strong was obliged to acknowledge to himself that Mrs. Brevoort, dark, *piquante*, vivacious, presented an extremely attractive picture on this September afternoon as she sat gazing at the blue waters of the Sound, equipped for a long ride on her wheel.

That Kate Strong was a much more striking and impressive figure than Mrs. Brevoort

was a fact that had not appealed to the young man's mind. Perhaps he had not observed his sister critically. Or it may be that he had so long taken it for granted that Kate always made a good appearance that he was not inclined to waste time on the question as to the adaptability of a bicycle costume to his sister's use. At all events, the youth found pleasure in confining his attentions to Mrs. Brevoort, and failed to notice that his sister's face wore an expression of melancholy and that there was a listlessness in her manner that the warmth of the day could not wholly explain.

"And you have heard nothing more about him?" asked Mrs. Brevoort, gazing interestedly at Ned Strong. "It seems very strange that he has never written you a line."

"Doesn't it?" cried the young man. "And he was such a thoroughbred in his manner and appearance! Wasn't he, Kate?"

"He was very attractive," answered his sister, somewhat reluctantly, it seemed. "I feel sure that some day we shall find an explanation to the mystery."

"Oh, I don't know," exclaimed Mrs. Brevoort, airily. "You see, I don't take a bit of stock in these foreigners. I have seen so much of them! It may be bad form on my part, but I prefer an American gentleman to the most fascinating European that ever claimed descent from Charlemagne or William the Conqueror." She cast a mischievous, challenging glance at Ned Strong, and went on: "There's something about monarchical countries that begets ideal lovers but impossible husbands. The greatest complaint over absentee landlords on the other

side comes from American girls who have married titled foreigners."

Ned Strong laughed. "On behalf of my fellow-countrymen I thank you, Mrs. Brevoort. It is too bad that your convictions have not a greater following here among us."

"So much the worse for those who do not agree with me. How much can an American girl know about a titled foreigner who comes over here looking for a rich wife? Take the case you have just been telling me about," continued Mrs. Brevoort, vivaciously. "This fascinating youth called himself 'Count Szalaki.' How easy it was for you to discover that there was no such title in Rexania! 'Twas surprisingly clumsy on his part."

"That's one reason that leads me to think," remarked Ned, "that there is something more in the affair than a mere adventurer's escapade. If he had been a fraud he would have been more careful in his choice of a name. If he was, as I have sometimes suspected, a man very high in rank, who wished to disguise his identity, he would have chosen a title that did not exist, taking it for granted that we would respect his wish to remain unknown. There are royal personages on the other side who travel under names that one cannot find in Burke's Peerage or the Almanach de Gotha."

"That's merely a matter of form," exclaimed Mrs. Brevoort, glancing at Kate. "Everybody knows who they are, wherever they go. I was introduced to a king in Paris who had chosen to trot around under the name of Mr. Smith, but it was a very thin disguise. He was such a wretched conver-

sationalist that I knew at once that he concealed a throne behind his stupidity. A real Mr. Smith could have talked about something besides the weather."

Kate smiled at the sarcastic little woman's words.

"What a thorough democrat you are, Mrs. Brevoort!" she remarked. "I almost suspect that you intend to go in for politics."

"Why not?" cried Mrs. Brevoort enthusiastically. "If we don't take part in public affairs, other women will. I believe it is our duty to raise the tone of politics by taking an interest in them. If the men of our class won't do their duty by the State, it is for us to take their place." She looked at Ned Strong defiantly.

"I suspect," he remarked, cautiously, "that you do not approve of my indifference to public affairs, Mrs. Brevoort."

"Most assuredly I do not," she exclaimed emphatically. "A youth who claims a divine right to occupy a European throne and defends that assumed right with cannon and gunpowder is, to my mind, in a false position, but he is more consistent than a young American who possesses the prerogative of the ballot and won't take the trouble to go to the polls to vote."

Ned Strong laughed merrily. "What a long memory you have, Mrs. Brevoort! It is nearly a year since you learned that I failed to register last fall, and now you bring a sweeping accusation against me. I fear you do not find me possessed of the saving grace of patriotism."

"Patriotism!" cried the youth's accuser. "Surely, if you have it, it finds queer ways

of expression, Mr. Strong. You fail to vote, and yet you are forever denouncing this country for going to the dogs. I really believe that I have heard you crack a joke at the expense of George Washington."

A smile of amusement crossed Kate Strong's face. "He deserves what you are giving him, Mrs. Brevoort. Ned is a thorough believer in his divine right to let other people save the country."

"This is unfair," cried the young man, with assumed annoyance. "I am outnumbered two to one. You have me at a disadvantage. But I will not attempt now, Mrs. Brevoort, to defend my position. And, luckily for me, here comes my chance for escape. You cannot talk politics on the wheel, you two. Are you ready to mount? It is just three o'clock, and we are in good time for a long spin."

A boy in livery had brought their wheels to the front of the club-house, and, mounting quickly, the trio sped down the pathway toward the entrance that opened on to the grounds from the main highway. Mrs. Brevoort and Ned Strong led the way, and Kate followed them, a flush of physical enjoyment mounting to her cheeks as she chased the south wind inland.

CHAPTER XIV.

MRS. BREVOORT and Ned Strong sped along in silence for a time. The roads were dry and hard, and there was enough life in the breeze that had kissed the sea to make even violent exercise seductive. Ned's companion was an enthusiastic and accomplished wheelwoman, and she pedalled on merrily by his side, sometimes smiling up at him in the mere joy of physical exertion. They had reached the high-road, and were rapidly making their way toward New Rochelle when Ned turned to his companion and said:

"Tell me, Mrs. Brevoort, what is your idea of Kate's feeling toward Count Szalaki? Do you think she is really interested in the man?"

"How stupid you are!" cried the little woman, who seldom failed to display either real or assumed enthusiasm regarding any given topic of conversation. Turning in her saddle, she looked back, and saw that Kate Strong was wheeling steadily forward a hundred yards to their rear. "But what else could I expect? All men are stupid about certain matters. Of course your sister is interested in Count Szalaki. So am I. I am wild to see the boy. From what you both say of him, he must be simply irresistible."

Ned Strong frowned and impatiently increased the speed of his wheel. He knew

how to withstand the coquetry of a young girl, but the "in-and-out running of a widow," as he called it to himself, kept him in a state of nervous worry most of the time.

"I suppose," he remarked crossly, "that what a man needs in these days to make him interesting are black curly hair and an air of mystery. In that case I'm out of it completely."

Mrs. Brevoort laughed aloud.

"What a jealous creature you are, Mr. Strong! Your wife will have a sad life of it, unless she is a very clever woman."

"I don't intend to marry," remarked the youth sternly. "What a fool I'd be to sell my birthright for a mess of affectation! And that's what a woman is to-day—simply a mess of affectation."

"What an elegant expression!" cried Mrs. Brevoort, a gleam of malice in her laughing eyes as she looked up at the youth, who was gazing stubbornly forward and pushing the pedals of his wheel as though he had suffered a great wrong and was obliged to work for his living. "But it does you credit, Mr. Strong. It indicates on your part a remote but more or less intimate acquaintance with biblical lore."

"But there's one thing certain," continued the young man, not heeding her sarcasm, "and that is that if I *should* marry I would not tie myself down to a silly girl who might at any moment meet a curly-haired man with a title and leave me in the lurch."

Mrs. Brevoort laughed mockingly.

"How self-confident you are, little boy!" she exclaimed. "Let me tell you, sir, it is my opinion that you will marry a blue-eyed,

golden-haired young doll, who will make you believe that you are the most wonderful man on earth and that she is the happiest woman. I can see it all in my mind's eye. You prize your freedom, as you think, more than most men. It is just your kind that fall victims to the sweet-faced, blond-haired little vixens who make the most tyrannical wives in the world. Do you like the prediction?"

The youth turned a frowning face to his *vis-à-vis*. "Why, oh, why, Mrs. Brevoort," he cried, "will you check the natural flow of my spirits by so dire a prophecy? Think of the awful fate that awaits me, if your words are true! I acknowlege that I have seen other men, perhaps as hard to suit as I am myself, falling into the clutches of spotless young girls who have lured them into the awful maelstrom of marriage; but I swear to you that I shall profit by their experience. I should never marry because I wanted a parlor ornament. When I give up my liberty, I shall insist upon a *quid pro quo*."

"What in the world is that, Mr. Strong?" cried Mrs. Brevoort, looking shocked as she glanced up at him with exaggerated amazement.

"That's Latin," answered the youth densely. "It's a dead language, but I used it for a very live purpose. I am not talking at random, you know, Mrs. Brevoort. There is method in my madness."

Ned Strong looked down at his companion meaningly, but she refused to meet his gaze.

"But method never yet saved madness from disaster," she remarked, sagely.

Her words seemed to check the youth's

impetuosity, for he cast a pleading glance at her averted face and then wheeled forward in silence for a time.

"The fact is," he began again, after he had renewed his courage, "the fact is, Mrs. Brevoort, that you don't understand me."

A smile that he could not see from his exalted perch crossed the widow's face. It is only a very young man who ever dares to tell a woman that she does not weigh him justly. The average man may deceive other men; it takes a genius to blind a woman.

"Explain yourself," she urged, not too warmly.

"I don't want to give you the impression," he went on, hesitatingly, "you know, that I don't admire women—that is, some women, don't you see?"

"I see," she answered pitilessly; "you admire women—some women, that is—for anything, everything, but matrimony. You said a few moments ago that you would never marry."

"Did I?" he asked, almost penitently. "I had forgotten that I went so far. But, I assure you, I didn't mean to imply, you know, that under certain circumstances and—don't you see—if I got the promise of just the right woman, that I shouldn't be very glad to give up my freedom, don't you know; that is, if it was perfectly agreeable to her, of course."

Mrs. Brevoort laughed outright, as they bowled down a long hill at the top of which the Strongs' manor-house peeped above the trees.

"You are the most amusing man I know, Mr. Strong," she exclaimed, as they reached

the level road and moved forward more slowly. "If you were more consistent, you wouldn't be half so much fun."

The youth was not altogether pleased at her remark. He glanced at her searchingly.

"You may do me an injustice, Mrs. Brevoort," he said firmly. "It is more than possible that I am more consistent than you suspect."

"In what?" she asked, rather recklessly, looking up at him mischievously. The expression in his eyes caused her a pang of regret at the challenge she had made.

"In my ideas regarding matrimony; in my convictions as to the woman I should wish to marry," he answered, meaningly. "Shall I explain?"

Mrs. Brevoort gave a questioning glance at his face and realized that he must not explain. She turned in her saddle, as if seeking the support of an ally at a crisis that must be averted at any cost.

"Why, where is Kate?" she cried, checking the speed of her wheel and gazing back eagerly along the road and up the hill that crept toward the manor-house.

Ned Strong turned, rather impatiently, and saw that the road was deserted, save that half-way up the hill an open vehicle, that he and Mrs. Brevoort had been too absorbed in conversation to notice when it passed them, was slowly mounting toward the summit.

"We must go back and find her," cried Mrs. Brevoort, dismounting from her wheel and looking at Ned anxiously.

"It would be useless," he said, stubbornly. "She has grown tired of riding alone and has gone back to the club-house. Or perhaps she

has stopped at the lodge to speak to Rudolph. That's our old homestead up there, you know, Mrs. Brevoort. Really, I don't think it would pay us to climb that hill on the remote chance of finding her. We'll turn off the main road just above here and get back to the club-house at once if you wish. It's a shorter cut than we could make by retracing our road over the hill."

Mrs. Brevoort reluctantly remounted her wheel.

"If you had not talked so much nonsense," she remarked unjustly to Ned Strong as they resumed their way, "we would not have lost track of Kate."

"A remark that I consider highly complimentary," commented the youth, smiling contentedly down at the disturbed countenance of Mrs. Brevoort.

CHAPTER XV.

POSADOWSKI passed through Prince Carlo's sleeping-room and stepped out upon the balcony. The heir to a throne was still dreaming of love and peace in a land where Cupid should reign supreme, as the arch-conspirator joined him. The young man's face was pensive with the gentle longings that tinged his revery with sadness. He turned toward Posadowski and said cordially:

"Be seated. I wish to talk with you."

The clear gray eyes of the exiled Rexanian rested searchingly on the pale, clean-cut face of the youth, and he smiled benignly as he drew a chair toward his captive and, seating himself, awaited the latter's pleasure.

"How long have you lived in this country, Posadowski?" asked the prince, abandoning his smiling visions with an effort and returning to the dreary realities of life.

"Nearly ten years," answered the revolutionist, whose gray hair proved that he was older than his smooth pink and white complexion would have indicated.

"I wish to ask you a few questions," continued Prince Carlo. "I feel—in spite of the fact that you deceived me at our first meeting—that in the larger matters pertaining to the questions at issue between us I can trust you implicitly. I give you credit, Posadowski, for being a man of good intentions

and honest in your avowed love for Rexania."

The arch-conspirator bowed gratefully, in acknowledgment of the generous words of the man he had wronged.

"Tell me frankly," went on the prince, "do you find, Posadowski, that in this land of democracy the people of the lower classes—for I learn that there are class distinctions in America—are in better case than the working-people of Rexania? Compare, for instance, the rich and the poor in Rexopolis and the rich and the poor in New York. Is there not more awful poverty in yonder city than in my capital across the sea? Conversely, is there in Rexania a nobleman who wields over the lives of others an authority as tyrannical as that exercised by the great landlords of New York?"

Posadowski gazed at Prince Carlo in bewilderment. He had come to point out to his royal captive the far-reaching influence his abdication of a crown would have upon the oppressed millions of the human race who still live and struggle and perish beneath the crushing weight of thrones and what those thrones demand; and, lo, this incarnation of obsolete systems and archaic theories had asked him a few pertinent and practical questions that rendered Posadowski's present mission seemingly absurd. For the arch-conspirator was a clear-headed, honest-hearted man, whose constitutional detestation for shams had long ago made him a rebel against monarchy, and now rendered him dumb as he slowly took in the full significance of the line of inquiry Prince Carlo had put forth.

"You do not answer, Posadowski," went on Prince Carlo, his voice and manner growing sterner as his words flowed more freely. "Do you know, man, why I came to this country, why I defied my father's wishes and ran a risk greater even than I imagined at the moment? I wished to see for myself what popular government has really done for a great people in a century of time. They told me on the steamer, these New Yorkers, facts that made even the hard heart of a king bleed for the poor devils who chased the *ignis fatuus* of freedom into the very stronghold of human tyranny. These are harsh words, Posadowski. Do you dare tell me that they are false—you who know the East Side of that great city in which you, and thousands of deluded Europeans, have toiled in misery that makes the lot of a Rexanian peasant easy, even luxurious, in comparison? Perhaps I have been misinformed. Perhaps I have failed to read aright the newspapers that have come to my hand since I reached this strange, distorted land. But what I have heard, what I have read, forces me to the conviction that no Rexanian in Rexopolis has ever suffered from a form of tyranny so pitiless as that which keeps our countrymen in New York poorer and more hopeless than they were in their native land. If I am wrong, if I am deceived through insufficient data, I am sure you will set me right. Speak, man. Have I told the truth?"

Posadowski was silent for a moment. Then he answered, a note of stubborness in his voice:

"Industrial conditions here are not as they

should be. That is true. But surely a monarchy would not set them right."

"Ha!" cried Prince Carlo, "that is just the point. A monarchy would not solve the problems of this country. On the other hand, a republic would not remedy the defects in Rexania's body politic. I am liberal in my views, Posadowski. I will grant you that if I should mount the throne of Rexania I could not rule after the fashion of my great-grandfather. The king and his people must walk hand-in-hand to-day, not at sword's points. But let Rexania become a republic on the instant, and what would result? Dissensions among the people, and political chaos: possibly the annexation of the country by a stronger power on our border. You talk of the selfishness of kings. Are they not the most heroic figures of the age? Take my father—God be with him! He has loved Rexania with a devoted unselfishness that only those who have been near him can appreciate. Weary, sad at heart, sometimes almost hopeless, he has had it in his power to accumulate a vast fortune, put it into portable shape, and abandon his country for a land in which he could live in peace and idleness. Do you think that such a step has been no temptation to him? You have so long looked at only one side of this matter that it will be hard for you to realize the full force of my question. I tell you that my father has loved Rexania with more fervor than you have ever felt for our fatherland, that he has displayed more courage and patriotic devotion in his life than any one of his rebellious subjects has ever shown, and that he has understood the practical necessities of

our country's environment better than the dreamers who have fostered discontent among the people. My father has been a grand and unselfish man, Posadowski, and you—you would crucify him."

The arch-conspirator had grown pale as the youth, with a calmness that was almost uncanny in its exhibition of self-control, had given voice to the thoughts that had taken form in his mind during his days of captivity. Presently he spoke again, observing that Posadowski had, at that moment, no arguments to advance.

"What dire calamities you may bring upon Rexania by holding me here a prisoner I dare to contemplate. Granting that you keep me captive from the very highest motives of patriotism, can you not see that you are endangering the very cause for which you strive? Let us suppose that my father dies and that Rexania becomes a republic. Unless you kill me, Posadowski, I shall eventually return to Europe. Not only that, but I shall be placed upon the throne of Rexania by forces against which your republican brethren could make no resistance worthy of the name. You are a clear-headed man, Posadowski. I can see by your face that what I have said has made an impression upon you that will give you, surely, a different point of view."

A grim smile crossed the arch-conspirator's countenance. "I will acknowledge, Prince Carlo, that I have not at this moment arguments at hand to answer the line of reasoning you have advanced. I am a slow thinker, and, as you can well understand, I am confronted by a dilemma of tremendous import. I must ask you to give me time to weigh

your words. If, after close consideration, I reach your conclusions—a result that necessitates the rejection of convictions that I have cherished for many years—I will discuss frankly with you the step that we should take."

Posadowski arose and approached the prince.

"Let me ask you, Prince Carlo," he said, before taking his leave, "let me ask you not to discuss the matters we have in hand with my colleagues. There is not one among them who would have allowed you to explain your position as I have done. You understand me?"

"Fully," answered the prince, smiling up at the gray-eyed Rexanian, "I understand you, Posadowski, and I trust you."

At that very moment Ludovics was making his exit from a road-house a mile away, the fumes of brandy imprisoned in the cells of his brain. With the money that Norman Benedict had left for him at the restaurant in St. Mark's Square, Ludovics had purchased a revolver and had gone on a hunting expedition into Westchester County. It was big game that he was after—nothing less than a king who was making wild merriment at his expense; and where that king was Ludovics well knew.

CHAPTER XVI.

JUST below the lodge gate, and at the very top of the hill, Kate Strong had fallen from her bicycle and sprained her ankle. The sudden and excruciating pain had begotten a momentary faintness that had prevented her from crying out in time to attract the attention of Mrs. Brevoort and her brother, who were at that instant coasting down the hillside at a merry pace.

Dizzy and sick with the shock she had sustained, Kate, realizing that she could not recall her companions, decided to arouse Rudolph at the lodge and send him at once for a physician. The pain in her ankle seemed to grow worse every moment, and she began to doubt her ability to reach the gate of her ancestral home, when an open carriage was dragged over the top of the hill by a panting horse, seemingly one of Westchester County's Revolutionary relics. The owner and driver of the ancient steed and ramshackle vehicle was wont to remark solemnly that his faithful horse had withstood the wear and tear of years and labor until the bicycle had begun to haunt his footsteps. The effect of wheels operated by men upon the nervous system of an old-fashioned and conservative horse, whose career of usefulness had been rendered possible by the prosperity of the livery-stable business, cannot be appreciated by a flippant mind. In the case under our

immediate consideration, the sight of a prostrate bicycle lying by the roadside affected the aged steed instantly. A snort, perhaps of triumph, burst from the supersensitive horse as it planted its forefeet stubbornly in the dust of the roadway and looked down at the overturned wheel.

The sudden halting of the carriage aroused Norman Benedict from an intense concentration of mind. He had been attempting to decide upon a course of action in case the rather unpromising clew he was now following should not result in the discovery of a Rexanian who, as he had been told, had charge of a deserted manor-house somewhere in the neighborhood. The sight that met his eyes caused the reporter to spring hastily from the carriage.

"Are you badly hurt?" he asked Kate Strong, who had managed to rise to her feet by the aid of the fence toward which she had crept. She stood with one hand on the railing, her face pale and drawn.

"I've sprained my ankle, I think," she answered, trying to smile gratefully at the stranger's kindly interest in her plight. "If I could get to the lodge, there, our man Rudolph could make me comfortable until a doctor reached me."

"Draw up here," cried Benedict to his driver. "Put your hand on my arm, Miss—Miss——"

"Miss Strong," answered Kate, resting her hand on his elbow and hobbling toward the carriage.

"Now drive slowly up to that gate," ordered Benedict again, as he turned and lifted Kate's bicycle from the ground and wheeled

it along by the side of his improvised ambulance.

As the carriage stopped in front of the lodge gate, the reporter rang a bell whose vibrations in these days of an international crisis always gave Rudolph Smolenski's nerves a severe shock. Since the Crown Prince of Rexania had become his prisoner, the lodge-keeper never opened the gate without first making a close and lengthy examination of those who craved his attention. The tradesmen and urchins who had occasion to beard the Rexanian in his lair had noticed of late that he had grown surly and unsociable, and that he allowed no one to pass the gloomy portals of a domain over which his long service had rendered him practically autocratic.

At the moment at which Norman Benedict pulled the knob that set a bell within the lodge a-trembling, Rudolph was deep in revery, and wondering what would be the outcome of Posadowski's mission to the prince. If he had known that at that very instant Prince Carlo was advancing arguments that tended to shake the arch-conspirator's devotion to the enterprise in which the Rexanian exiles were engaged, Rudolph would have felt even greater dissatisfaction than influenced his mood at the time. He had begun to grow impatient and restless. He had almost become a convert to Ludovics' belief in heroic measures. The fact was that Rudolph felt that he was risking more than any one of his colleagues in this lawless effort to make European history in a secluded corner of Westchester County. The longer the temporizing policy pursued by Posadowki was

continued, the more certain was Rudolph of the ultimate discovery of his secret and the loss of a place that was in all respects satisfactory to his indolent and rather unsociable nature. The thought of returning to the East Side to slave in a sweater's establishment filled him with horror.

There was something ominous in the sharp summons of the bell that caused him to lay aside his pipe with trembling hand, while his flabby cheeks turned white. He could think of no one who would be likely to disturb the lonely lodge at that hour, unless, as he reflected with conflicting emotions, Ludovics, the impetuous, had found his way back to the centre of high pressure.

Hurrying toward the entrance, his heart beating with unpleasant rapidity, Rudolph opened a peep-hole in the iron gate and looked out. His eyes first rested on Norman Benedict: there was nothing in the reporter's appearance to increase the lodge-keeper's apprehensions. But, as his glance fell upon the carriage, drawn up on the outside of the antique stepping-stone to the left of the gateway, a cold perspiration broke out upon his hands and face, and his short, puffy legs trembled beneath him. He had seen his employer's daughter often enough to recognize instantly the pale, patrician face of Kate Strong. For an instant consternation rendered him powerless. Then he turned from the gate and ran frantically toward the manor-house. Rukacs was on guard on the front piazza.

"Rukacs," cried the lodge-keeper, excitedly, "keep close behind the pillars, and don't show yourself where you can be seen from

the lodge. Tell Posadowski and the others to keep out of sight. And be sure that not a sound issues from this house until you hear from me again. Miss Strong, daughter of my employer, is at the lodge gate. She looks very pale: I think she may have fainted, or something of that kind. But keep a close watch, Rukacs. I'll do my best to hold her at the lodge, but you must keep your eye on the game."

Rudolph, his legs working clumsily under the pressure of a great crisis, rushed back to the gate, leaving Rukacs white with dismay. The lodge, as he passed it, seemed to tremble with the noise of a bell that froze the Rexanian's soul with its threatening insistence. Opening the gate, he confronted Norman Benedict.

"Miss Strong has sprained her ankle," said the reporter, who realized that this was no time for padding his news. "Come out and help me to get her on to a sofa. What are you staring at, man? Don't you speak English?"

Rudolph made a strong effort of will and approached the carriage. A spasm of pain crossed Kate's face as she gave one hand to Rudolph and the other to Benedict and stepped to the ground.

"I will go into the lodge, Rudolph," she said. "I couldn't stand the motion of that old conveyance a moment longer."

The lodge-keeper was white and speechless as he helped the injured girl into the parlor of the lodge, while the reporter drew the only comfortable piece of furniture in the room, an antique lounge, toward the front windows and arranged a tattered pillow at its head.

"There is a doctor not far from here?" asked Benedict, turning to the lodge-keeper and giving him a penetrating glance. There was something in Rudolph's manner that struck the quick-witted reporter as peculiar.

"Half a mile down the road," answered Rudolph, his voice unsteady.

"Get into the carriage and bring him here at once," ordered Benedict, sharply, noting instantly the reluctance Rudolph's manner expressed. Kate Strong also noticed her retainer's hesitation.

"Do as this gentleman directs, Rudolph," she commanded; and the lodge-keeper, seeing no alternative at hand, turned and left the room with hesitating steps.

"Pardon me, Miss Strong," remarked Benedict, stationing himself at a window from which he could see the roadway, "your man is a foreigner?"

"Yes," answered Kate. "He is a Rexanian, I believe." Her reply caused the reporter to regret for the moment that he had allowed the lodge-keeper to leave his sight. Of what significance was a girl with a sprained ankle, compared with the greatest newspaper "beat" of the year?

CHAPTER XVII.

"You are to drive me half a mile down the road and back again," said Rudolph sullenly to the aged Jehu who had carried Nemesis in a tumble-down vehicle to the gateway of the lodge. "Don't stop to think about it. The sooner its done the sooner its over."

With this philosophical remark, the Rexanian entered the carriage and seated himself gloomily behind the taciturn and dispirited driver. There was a melancholy aspect to the conveyance as it moved slowly away from the lodge gate. The broken-hearted steed seemed to be plunged in a gloomy revery regarding the iconoclastic influence of bicycles; the driver cracked his tattered whip in a hopeless way, as if he realized the impotence of his efforts to give an appearance of life and activity to his antiquated turnout; while Rudolph's face wore an expression of mingled apprehension and dismay that grew more intense the farther he rolled away from the manor-house.

It was this depressing caravan that met the restless gaze of Ludovics about a quarter of a mile below the lodge. He had cut loose from his alcoholic moorings at the road-house, and was tacking toward Rudolph's ill-fated residence with a purpose much more steady than his steps. He paused by the side of the roadway and aroused Rudolph from his dark forebodings by a loud cry.

"Rudolph!" shouted Ludovics. "Rudolph! Have they turned you out? Good! I knew you were the right kind! Here, man, give me the grip."

The little inebriate had reached the side of the carriage and seized Rudolph's cold, damp, flabby hand.

The lodge-keeper gazed calmly at his unruly compatriot. The thought had entered his mind that it was possible to save time by sending Ludovics for the doctor while he and his disheartened driver returned to the lodge.

"Ludovics," remarked Rudolph, diplomatically, "I'm glad to see you." Then he leaned down over the back wheel and whispered, "Be cautious, Ludovics. The driver there is not one of us."

Ludovics flashed a glance of withering scorn at the bent back of the phlegmatic Jehu.

"I see," he said, with drunken gravity, "you have hypnotized him, Rudolph. It is well."

"Yes, that's it," answered the lodge-keeper, who was weighing all the chances and trying to reach a decision. Finally he said, "Ludovics, I must get back to the lodge at once. You passed a large white house with pillars in front of it, about a quarter of a mile below here. There's a sign on the gate reading 'Dr. C. H. Moore.' Now I want you to go back there and tell the doctor to come to the lodge at once. Do you understand me?"

Ludovics drew himself up haughtily, as if Rudolph had cast a slur upon his intellectual ability.

"Of course I understand you," he answered, petulantly. Then a vivid suspicion flashed through his befuddled brain.

"Tell me, Rudolph," he cried, in low, feverish tones, "is he sick? Didn't his food agree with him? Ha ha! Well done, Rudolph! I knew you were the right kind, Rudolph. He needs a doctor, does he? Good! I'll go and get the doctor, Rudolph. Give him something more to eat and drink before the doctor gets there, brother. He's a stubborn boy, you know. But I trust you, Rudolph, I trust you. Dr. Moore, you said? Dr. Moore? Down the road? Very good, Rudolph. I'm off." Ludovics laughed with a fiendish glee that horrified even the unimpressionable lodge-keeper.

"Be careful what you say, Ludovics," he said, harshly. "Simply ring the bell and say that Dr. Moore is wanted at the Strongs' manor-house. Understand me! Don't talk too much, or you may get into trouble. Now go."

Leaning forward, Rudolph directed the driver to arouse himself and his horse from lethargy and return to the lodge gate. A moment later the broken-spirited horse was retracing his steps hopelessly, while Rudolph was leaning back in his seat in a more contented frame of mind. He had saved at least ten minutes by entrusting his mission to Ludovics.

The latter had turned his back on the vehicle and was making his way down the road at a pace that indicated a set purpose and a slight recovery from alcoholic domination on his part. Suddenly he paused, looked back at the retreating carriage, and, leaving the

road, leaned against a fence and indulged for a moment in an inward debate. Then he took from a pocket in his coat a flask that he had purchased at the road-house, and, removing the cork, swallowed a fiery mouthful of the raw liquor.

"I wonder," he said argumentatively to himself, "I wonder if Rudolph is a truly patriotic cook? There's a king up here in Westchester County who needs a doctor. I'm going for the doctor. I look well, don't I, Ludovics, getting a doctor for a sick king? I wish I knew how sick he is. If he's as sick of himself as I am of kings, he'll die anyway." He staggered to the road and turned again toward the manor-house.

"I don't think I'm a success going for doctors," he mused. "I do better when I'm going for kings." He placed an unsteady hand on the rear pocket of his trousers and satisfied himself that the revolver he had purchased with a part of Norman Benedict's gratuity was in its place.

"There's nothing so good for a sick king as pills," he muttered. "Pills! Pills made of lead! They're much more certain than Rudolph's cooking. Rudolph means well, but he doesn't drink enough brandy."

As this conclusion forced itself upon him, he stopped again and drew fresh patriotic inspiration from his flask. It was beginning to grow dark as Ludovics reached the high fence that enclosed the grounds of the manor-house and ran up flush with the front wall of the lodge. The sun had sunk in the west like a glowing cannon-ball blushing for its crimes.

"It's lucky I'm small," mused Ludovics, as

he nimbly mounted the railing and let himself down on the other side. For a moment it struck him as curious that he could climb a fence with more assurance than he could follow a roadway.

"That must be good brandy," he muttered. "It doesn't help my walking much, but it makes me climb like a cat."

Stealthily he made his way through the tangled grass that covered the lawn until he stood beneath the balcony at the rear of the manor-house. The waters of the Sound were leaden-hued, and the gathering gloom of night gave a dreary aspect to the scene before him.

"The doctor has come," said Ludovics to himself, a mocking smile overspreading his face as he glanced upward and saw how easy it would be for a man of his weight and agility to reach the second story of the manor-house. "Just where my patient is, I don't know, but I'm almost sure that Rudolph said he was going to put the king in the rear room on the second floor." The cold, damp breeze that had arisen when the sun went down chilled the murderous little Rexanian to the marrow: another pull at the flask was necessary to check the trembling of his hands.

"I'll cure him," he continued, leaning against one of the posts that supported the balcony. "I'll cure him. My medicine chest is ready for use. It never fails. When I doctor a king—eh, Ludovics?—he's never sick again, is he? Rudolph's cooking is not so sure as my little pills. One pill in a vital part, and the man is never sick again! Isn't that wonderful? Never sick again!"

Thus muttering to himself, Ludovics began to climb the post at the southern end of the balcony, his teeth gleaming in the half-light as he grinned maliciously, while his eyes glanced with feverish eagerness at a ray of light that flared from a window above him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

NORMAN BENEDICT had removed Kate Strong's legging and the long buttoned shoe that had covered her sprained ankle, and had deftly bound up the injured member with a handkerchief, after he had relieved the pain by applying cold water and a gentle massage.

"You have been very kind to me," said Kate, gratefully, as she leaned back on the sofa and realized how much more comfortable the reporter's skill had made her feel. "I owe you a great debt of gratitude." How much she was indebted to Benedict she did not fully realize, for he had been under a strong temptation to follow Rudolph at any cost when he had learned that the lodge-keeper was the very Rexanian he had come up into Westchester to find.

"Your man, there," said Benedict, questioningly, glancing at his watch, "has he been long in your service?"

"Several years," answered Kate. "I believe he was exiled from Rexania after the revolution of ten years ago."

Her remark tended to increase the reporter's interest in the lodge-keeper.

"They are a curious people, those Rexanians," he remarked, drawing a chair toward the sofa and seating himself where he could watch Kate's face. "I have seen something of them on the East Side."

Kate felt an almost irresistible desire to

confess to the youth that they were a race in which she took at that moment an interest that was founded on a most unhappy incident.

"You see," Benedict went on, noting the animated expression on her face, "I am a newspaper reporter, Miss Strong, and in my work I come into contact with many curious phases of life and queer kinds of people in New York. Of course you have never met a Rexanian, excepting your lodge-keeper, Rudolph?"

"Oh, but I have," cried Kate, who did not fully realize that her accident had rendered her slightly feverish and therefore somewhat more loquacious than usual. "A Rexanian dined at our house in the city a few nights ago. He had come over on the steamer with my father and mother. He was a very charming man."

There was something in her voice that impressed Benedict as peculiar.

"One of the Rexanian nobility, of course?" he asked, diplomatically.

"Yes," she answered, with some hesitation. "He was a count—Count Szalaki." Her face flushed as the thought flashed through her mind that her frankness in the presence of a newspaper reporter was, to say the least of it, indiscreet. But there were many influences at work to render Kate Strong less reticent than she ordinarily was by habit and temperament. The sudden disappearance of their Rexanian guest and the shadow that had been cast upon his memory by her family had made her impatient to clear up the mystery that surrounded the only man who had ever fully satisfied the romantic long-

ings that pertained to her youth and her self-centred nature.

That Ned Strong was fitted neither by temperament nor by experience to solve a problem that grew more and more inexplicable as time passed, his sister well knew. Already he had lost interest in a mystery that grew more important to Kate the longer it remained unsolved. She herself was powerless to prosecute a line of inquiry that, she felt sure, would, if carried forward to the end, exonerate the Rexanian whose melancholy and fascinating face had impressed her as that of a man whose soul was too lofty for subterfuge and fraud.

Fate had thrown her into the enforced companionship of a man whose journalistic training had thoroughly fitted him for solving mysteries of the kind that now weighed upon her overwrought mind. Conflicting emotions warred within her. She possessed many of the prejudices and all the self-control that pertain to the real patrician; added to these was a maidenly fear that somebody might discover the secret that agitated her heart—a secret that she hardly dared to whisper to herself. On the other hand, she had grown almost desperate in her anxiety to learn something more of Count Szalaki, to receive an explanation of his seemingly churlish silence that would vindicate her innermost conviction that he was what her fancy painted him. Perhaps under other circumstances her natural disinclination to grow too confidential with a man about whom she knew almost nothing would have prevailed, but the reaction following her accident had rendered her will-power less active than

usual and her inclination to give way to an impulse stronger.

"Count Szalaki!" exclaimed Norman Benedict, musingly. Suddenly an expression of eagerness crossed his face. "His name was on the passenger list of one of the incoming steamers recently. I noticed it at the time. And so he is a Rexanian! That is very interesting. You were kind enough to say a moment ago, Miss Strong, that you owe me a debt of gratitude. That is hardly true, for what I have done for you has been a pleasure to me. But, frankly, you can do me a kindness. I should very much like to meet Count Szalaki."

A mournful expression rested on Kate Strong's face.

"I am sorry," she said regretfully, "but I cannot gratify your wish. We—we—don't know where Count Szalaki is."

Norman Benedict sprang up in excitement. There was something in the girl's face and voice that revived the nervous tremor that had affected him when the tremendous possibilities of the hints thrown out by Ludovics had first seriously impressed him.

"Do you mean to tell me," he asked, eagerly, "that Count Szalaki has disappeared?"

"We have seen and heard nothing of him since the night he dined with us," answered Kate.

The reporter paced up and down the room impatiently.

"What do you know about him?" he cried, at length. "Are you sure, Miss Strong, that —that his title was genuine?"

Kate had found the reporter's excitement contagious, and she did not notice the bald

discourtesy of his question. Her desire to gain Benedict as an ally in her efforts to re-establish the reputation of her father's guest had become irresistible.

"We know," she admitted, "that there is no such title as that of Count Szalaki in Rexania."

Norman Benedict stood still and looked down at her with an expression of eager interest on his face for which she could not satisfactorily account.

At that moment the carriage in which Rudolph had gone on his futile mission in search of a physician rattled up to the gate, and before the reporter could put further questions to Kate the lodge-keeper had entered the room.

"The doctor will be here directly, Miss Strong," said Rudolph, nervously. "Shall I dismiss the carriage?"

"Let the carriage wait," answered Norman Benedict, harshly. Striding up to the pale-faced Rexanian, he said, in a stern voice:

"Did you ever hear in Rexania, man, of a certain Count Szalaki?"

It was, in a sense, a random shot, but it struck home. Rudolph's face looked like a mask of bluish-white paste in the twilight gloom of the darkening chamber. He put up his hand, as if to ward off a blow. Kate Strong strained her eyes to catch the changing expression on the Rexanian's countenance. A deep silence fell upon the trio. Suddenly the answer came to the reporter's question, but not from Rudolph Smolenski.

Muffled by distance, but unmistakable in its horrid import, there echoed from the manor-house the ugly crash of a pistol-shot.

CHAPTER XIX.

MRS. BREVOORT and Ned Strong had found, upon inquiry at the club-house, that Kate had not been seen since she had wheeled away with them. They stood at a corner of the piazza and held council with each other.

"How careless you have been, Mr. Strong!" Mrs. Brevoort was saying, chidingly. "It is well that you have decided never to marry. How can a man who loses track of a sister hope to keep his eye on a wife?"

"You are exacting," he returned. "Why should I expect to perform miracles? I am not possessed of second-sight, nor of eyes in the back of my head. But, Mrs. Brevoort, it is a condition, not a theory, that confronts us, as a famous man once said. Now, if you are tired of wheeling, won't you walk over to our old house with me? Kate did not come down the hill, you remember. I am inclined to think that something may have happened to her wheel, and that she stopped to have Rudolph, our lodge-keeper, repair it. It is not much of a walk, by a short cut I know how to make."

"I think, Mr. Strong," answered Mrs. Brevoort, "that you had better go alone. It is getting late, and I must dress at once."

"A woman's eternal excuse for unsociability!" cried the youth petulantly. Then

he grew beseeching. "I ask so few favors of you, Mrs. Brevoort," he pleaded. "And, remember, Kate may have met with an accident. She would feel very lonely in that old lodge if I had to go for a doctor. I appeal unselfishly to you, Mrs. Brevoort. Walk over to the lodge with me. Please do!"

Mrs. Brevoort gazed at the blue waters of the Sound musingly. She was not anxious to bring a problem that must soon be solved to an issue at once. But she was really worried about Kate Strong and impatient to learn what had befallen her best friend. Furthermore, she knew that the short cut to the manor-house was not a lover's lane, in that the path for the most part demanded the single-file formation. Her hesitation, therefore, was short-lived, and she was soon hurrying away from the club-house, with Ned Strong, in a gay mood, striding along at her side.

"I cannot understand, Mr. Strong," she remarked severely, after they had left the main road and were following the narrow path that led toward the rear of the manor-house, "I cannot understand how you can be so light-hearted under these depressing circumstances."

"The fact is, Mrs. Brevoort," explained Ned, "that I am not greatly worried about Kate; and as for myself, I was never more contented in my life."

He glanced back at Mrs. Brevoort merrily.

"And you will be late for dinner, too," exclaimed his companion. "Surely you are one man among many thousands, Mr. Strong, to grow jolly with such a dismal fate staring you in the face."

The youth laughed aloud. Then he half-turned around, and said, impressively:

"I eat nothing in these joyous days, Mrs. Brevoort. Food has not passed my lips for a week. I live on air, I walk on air, I am an airy nothing with a local habitation and a name. Speaking of that name, Mrs. Brevoort——"

"But we weren't speaking of that name," cried the little *mondaine*, emphatically. "You were talking about the ethereal nature of your favorite food. I am sorry to say that I require something more substantial than country air to satisfy my appetite. You will observe, Mr. Strong, that this is a veiled hint intended to make you increase your pace. At the rate at which you are now walking, it will be scandalously late before we get anything to eat."

"Alas," cried Ned, in assumed despair, "how little encouragement a man gets to cultivate the poetic side of his nature in these days! Just look at this scene before us," he continued, turning as they reached the top of a knoll that gave them a view of the Sound and of the rear balcony of the manor-house. They stood in silence for a time, watching the changing tints that the early evening scattered with prodigality across the surface of the land-locked sea. Over toward the Long Island shore a brilliantly lighted steamboat, a great hotel escaping by water toward the east, threw its merry gleam across the waves.

Suddenly Ned Strong laid his hand excitedly on his companion's arm.

"Look," he whispered, pointing to the balcony of the manor-house. "What is that?"

A small dark figure could be seen creeping toward one of the windows that opened on the balcony.

"There is a light inside the room," exclaimed Ned, almost trembling with excitement. At that instant the dark form arose from its recumbent attitude and stood in bold relief against the window. On the instant there came the crash of breaking glass, then silence.

"He's a burglar!" exclaimed Mrs. Brevoort, her voice shaking perceptibly. Somehow, she did not notice that Ned Strong's arm had been thrown around her protectingly.

At that moment the sharp, evil crack of a pistol startled the night air.

"A burglar or a murderer," muttered Ned Strong, awe-struck. "Come," he cried, almost carrying his companion forward in his excitement. "Come, we must get to the lodge at once and find Rudolph! Come! Quick!"

CHAPTER XX.

RUDOLPH SMOLENSKI had relieved the intense gloom that had settled over his inhospitable drawing-room by lighting two oil lamps and several candles, much to the satisfaction of his unwelcome guests. The pistol-shot that had emphasized their proximity to crime had for an instant seemed to nail down the curtain of night at one blow. Rudolph's activity in making the apartment more cheerful had greatly tended to relieve the strain of the situation.

"I am in a quandary," Benedict had said to Kate. "I hesitate to leave you here at this moment, but there is a great mystery to be solved at once."

Rudolph's hand trembled perceptibly as he held a match to a candle's wick. There was something in his manner that affected Kate Strong unpleasantly. Her overwrought nerves exaggerated the uncanny features of her surroundings, and she grew cold at the thought of Benedict's departure.

At that instant a door opened at the rear of the lodge, and Mrs. Brevoort and Ned Strong, groping through a dark hallway toward a gleam of light, burst into the room.

"What is the matter, Kate?" cried Mrs. Brevoort, rushing toward her friend, while her companion stood in the centre of the room, scrutinizing, with a puzzled expres-

sion in his eyes, the disturbed faces of Benedict and Rudolph.

"Rudolph," cried Ned Strong, suppressed excitement in his voice, "a crime has been committed at the house—perhaps a murder. What do you know about it?"

Norman Benedict had been relieved of all responsibility, so far as Kate Strong was concerned.

"Pardon me," he said to Ned Strong, "but would it not be well for us to go up to the manor-house at once?" Benedict did not lack courage, but, under the circumstances, he was pleased at the prospect of having an ally in his tour of investigation.

Rudolph Smolenski, pale with apprehension, but rendered active by the dark possibilities that threatened him, had placed himself at the doorway through which the young men threatened to pass. The Rexanian put up a hand with a gesture that was both threatening and imploring.

"Remain here, Mr. Strong; and you, sir. It may not be safe for you to go up to the house."

"What do you mean, Rudolph?" asked Ned Strong, sternly. "Be careful, man. You are putting yourself in a very questionable position. Stand aside, and let us pass. If there's any one in great danger, Rudolph, I think you're the man. Stand aside."

Kate Strong and Mrs. Brevoort, with hand clasped in hand, were seated side by side on the sofa, gazing with disturbed faces at the three men.

"Listen to Rudolph, Ned," implored Kate. "He may be right. You may run a great risk in going to the house."

Rudolph still stubbornly held his place in front of the door. Norman Benedict's patience was at an end.

"Come, come, man," he exclaimed. "Out of the way, or we'll be obliged to use force. Do you hear me?"

Mrs. Brevoort had arisen. Ned Strong felt a gentle hand on his arm.

"Don't go up to that gloomy old house, Mr. Strong," she implored, looking up at him with an expression on her face that made life seem very precious to him at that moment.

"There is not the slightest cause to worry," he said, quietly, although his pulse was beating feverishly. "This gentleman—Mr.—Mr.——?"

"My name is Benedict," answered the reporter, impatiently. "I found Miss Strong with a sprained ankle near the gate, and have had the pleasure of being of service to her. But you'll pardon me for using heroic measures. I have wasted too much time already."

With these words, Benedict seized Rudolph by the collar of his coat and hurled the pudgy little Rexanian into a far corner of the room. Then he bolted through the door.

"I can't let him go alone," cried Ned Strong, reluctantly but firmly removing Mrs. Brevoort's hand from his arm. "Remain here. We'll be back at once."

Thus saying, he dashed down the dark corridor in pursuit of Benedict.

Rudolph Smolenski had managed to totter to his feet and was gazing about the room in a dazed way. The reporter had, in the excitement of the moment, used more force in

removing the Rexanian from his path than was actually necessary for his purpose.

"What do you make of all this, Kate?" exclaimed Mrs. Brevoort, reseating herself beside the girl, and looking at the ludicrous picture that Rudolph presented, with a nervous smile on her face.

"I'm sure I've got beyond the point where my opinion is worth much," answered Kate, wearily. "My ankle aches, and the whole universe seems to be nothing but an exposed nerve."

"Poor girl, how thoughtless I've been!" cried Mrs. Brevoort, gently, pushing Kate back into a reclining position. "Get me some cold water, man," she said to the lodge-keeper, whose wits were beginning to return to his aching head.

"That is much better," said Kate gratefully, a few moments later. "But is it not strange that the doctor does not come?—Rudolph, did you see Dr. Moore?"

"I did, Miss Strong," answered the Rexanian, with reckless defiance of the truth. He had begun to feel that one lie more or less would not make much difference with the retribution that threatened to overtake him so soon. "He should have been here long before this."

The minutes dragged slowly along. To the two women the next quarter of an hour seemed almost interminable. Mrs. Brevoort used part of it to describe to Kate Strong the weird scene that she and Ned had witnessed just before the pistol-shot had punctuated the course of events.

Morose, but alert, Rudolph Smolenski overheard her story, and his sluggish brain began

to grasp the fact that it was high time for him to act. Hitherto he had been tenacious of a lingering hope that he had not already forfeited his situation. The blow he had received when he struck the floor had not tended to give him a clear idea of the helplessness of his position. But as it dawned upon him that Ludovics must have been the man who fired the pistol at the manor-house, a cold sweat broke out upon his hands and brow. He had been the last man to talk to Ludovics, and the driver of the carriage that still waited outside the lodge gate had been a witness to their conversation. If Ludovics had murdered the prince, he, Rudolph, would be held as an accessory before the fact.

"Where are you going, Rudolph?" asked Kate suspiciously, as the Rexanian arose and walked unsteadily toward the door leading into the corridor.

"Just outside a moment, Miss Strong," he faltered. "I will take a look toward the big house and see if they are coming."

"Do," returned Kate. "I am growing very impatient," she added, turning to Mrs. Brevoort.

They sat in silence for a time, their cold hands pressed together.

Suddenly they heard the rattle of a ramshackle vehicle as it passed the front of the house, bound cityward.

"That's strange," cried Mrs. Brevoort, springing up. "What does it mean?"

It meant that they would never set eyes upon Rudolph Smolenski again. But they had no time now to dwell upon his disappearance. Hardly had the noise of the re-

treating carriage died away when the sound of many voices reached them from the end of the corridor, and they felt a mingled sensation of relief and apprehension at the approaching footsteps of a crowd.

CHAPTER XXI.

PRINCE CARLO was seated at a small, round, mahogany table in the centre of his shadow-haunted room. Before him lay a not uninviting repast. Cold meat, cut-up peaches, bread, butter, iced coffee, and a dish containing a kind of pickle known only to Rexanians strove in vain to tempt his appetite. Rukacs had spread the table silently, but with an air of deference that was grateful to the captive prince. No word had been spoken between them, but in his very silence Rukacs seemed to do homage to the youth's rank, a rank that the conspirator recognized in practice while in theory he denied its existence.

Evolution has not yet placed man so far above the lower order of animals that he does not in his heart of hearts acknowledge the tendency of nature to ratify the monarchical idea. He finds beneath him in the scale of being the bees setting up a queen and the herds of wild cattle paying homage to a king bull. He discovers that the prevailing conception of a future world, even among democrats, pictures God upon His throne, surrounded by celestial courtiers. Whether he looks up or down, therefore, man's eye rests upon the concrete manifestations of the abstract idea of royalty, and, sweeping the whole range of existence, he sees a throne beneath his feet and dreams of

another somewhere beyond the stars. The old cry, "*Le roi est mort, vive le roi*," may have in it the germs of universal truth that a nation of freemen would do well to heed. The substitution of a political "boss" for an hereditary ruler may be a step forward, but there are those to whom it looks like reaction illustrating the very nature of things.

Prince Carlo of Rexania sipped his coffee and pondered certain questions related to the propositions just laid down. Whatever of weakness there had been in the voluptuous dreams that had tempted him from the stern path of duty in the afternoon had disappeared, and his mind now dwelt wholly upon the obligations he owed to his people, his forefathers, and himself. As the thought of his physical helplessness at that moment stung him into a gesture of angry impatience, Rukacs crossed the room and closed the window that looked out upon the balcony, the window that Prince Carlo had vainly attempted to open on the night of his arrival. Rukacs understood the secret of its fastenings, and silently, almost stealthily, took an unnecessary precaution against his captive's escape. The manner in which the Rexanian performed this task proved that he was, at bottom, ashamed of the *rôle* he was playing at the moment.

"If you desire anything, your—your royal highness," he faltered, as he recrossed the room and placed a hand upon the door opening into the hall, "will you kindly rap three times upon the floor?" The conspirator's flushed face bore outward evidence of his interior agitation. Rukacs loved freedom too well to make a graceful jailer.

Prince Carlo bowed in acknowledgment of his captor's words, and on the instant found himself alone, the grating sound of a rusty key again serving to emphasize the chilling fact that he, the heir-apparent to the throne of Rexania, was a prisoner in a land whose political stock in trade is liberty.

There was something oppressive in the sudden silence. Prince Carlo glanced furtively around the room. He had become used to the depressing characteristics of the apartment, and the antic shadows that lurked in the far corners and hovered around the curtains of the bed no longer affected his nerves. But at this moment the uncanny spirit of the old house seemed to whisper to him in threatening tones. His overwrought fancy pictured the stealthy assassin creeping through the damp corridors and dodging behind crumbling curtains in his search for blood. A door creaked on its hinges in some distant corner of the house; he started as though the sound carried with it a menace he must heed.

Presently the reaction came, and a smile of self-pity played about his clean-cut mouth. With an impatient gesture, he brushed his damp hair back from his brow and poured some of the iced coffee into a glass. He was about to raise the draught to his lips, when the conviction seized him that somebody's eyes were resting upon him. A shiver went through his frame, and he replaced the goblet upon the table with trembling hand. Courageous though Prince Carlo was by nature, there was a weird, uncanny influence at work, as it seemed to him, to disturb the balance of his nervous system.

Annoyed at himself, the youth arose from the table, and, resting one hand upon the coverlet, glanced toward the window. On the instant his eyes met the burning gaze of Ludovics, who crouched outside the window, enraged to find it locked. For a moment neither the prince nor the madman moved. Then, with one bound, the latter smashed his way through the glass, and cut and bleeding, a ghastly, crimson incarnation of all that is hideous in the cult of the assassin, he faced Prince Carlo across the table, while the lamp flickered threateningly as the night breeze swept through the window into the room.

The two men stood motionless, gazing into each other's eyes. The blood-stained madman, representative of all that is most horrible in the effort of man to escape from the tyranny of tradition and to seek higher things, faced the incarnation of reaction, the embodiment of obsolete prerogatives and time-dishonored claims. The man who was in the right was mad; he who was in the wrong was sane. Thus did they represent, as they stood facing each other in the dim light of that wind-beset chamber, ages of human history.

The glare in Ludovics' eyes faded slowly as he looked upon the pale, strong, beautiful face of the youth who had assumed in his wild fancy the figure of a tyrant who held wild revelry at the expense of the people in a palace here at hand. What gleam of reason returned to his crazy mind, who shall say? There was no bacchanalian carnival surrounding the prince; only a simple supper, untasted, spread before him. He was not mock-

ing Ludovics, but only looking at him with sad, splendid eyes that stirred the distraught soul of the madman to its depths. Beneath their gaze Ludovics seemed to collapse and slink away. He turned, with a low cry, that echoed through the room like the wail of a spirit damned, and stumbled towards the window.

Prince Carlo stood motionless at the table, watching the retreating form of the madman. Suddenly Ludovics drew himself erect and turned again to face the prince. Raising his pistol slowly until the muzzle rested against his forehead, Ludovics said, in voice so calm that it seemed to come from a man whose mind was absolutely normal:

"Your majesty, I salute you. Accept my homage."

On the instant he pulled the trigger and sent a bullet crashing through his crazy brain.

CHAPTER XXII.

PRINCE CARLO'S face was pale and drawn and his eyes gleamed feverishly as he turned from the ghastly sight in front of him and gazed at the Rexanians who had thronged upstairs and into the room. Their presence was a relief to him at that moment.

Posadowski pushed forward through the crowd of silent and awe-stricken men. Approaching the prince, he said:

"Your royal highness, believe me, we did not know that this man," pointing to the prostrate form of the suicide, "had left the city."

Prince Carlo turned toward the group, whose white faces in the flickering light thrown out by the wind-pestered lamp seemed to haunt the room like ghosts. The youth's countenance was stern and menacing. He had held up a hand and haughtily enforced silence upon the cowed conspirators.

"You know not, my countrymen," said Prince Carlo, in a low, penetrating voice, and speaking in the Rexanian tongue, "how deep is the grief that stirs my soul. Yonder madman sought my life. His murderous hand was turned against himself. Who shall say what power it was that intervened to save me from his wrath? Do you call it chance? If such it was, there is no God. But in my heart of hearts I know that in this room we see the impress of a mighty hand.

The fiat of the King of kings has been obeyed. You plot to thwart His will. As well attempt to wound the stars with stones! You hold me here a prisoner. You think, blind, feeble children, that you can mould a nation's destiny, can dictate to the Omnipotent the future of a race: look upon the bloody form of that unhappy man and learn the lesson that God reigns. Listen! There is a voice that tells me that I must mount my father's throne. It tells me that in the universal plan that makes for higher things the part that I must take lies far from hence. I am no tyrant: I do not crave the awful power that he who wields a sceptre may usurp. My countrymen, I will be frank with you. To live in peace in this fair land, to lose my name and all the burdens that it bears, to forget that on my shoulders the welfare of a nation rests—ah, this were sweet. But a sterner fate is mine. I must go back to the land we love so well. I must some day take up the weary task that falls from my father's tired hands. I must sacrifice all things that most men love to the long service of a people not yet fitted for self-government. Think you that this is selfishness? I tell you that, if my love of country and of duty were not greater than my love of self, no power on earth could force me back to Rexania—to the land that offers me a throne upon which no man can sit to-day in peace. A crown? A crown of thorns awaits me. Power? Only so long as it is used in the service of God and my people. Homage? The only homage that makes glad the heart of kings comes from those who praise the man rather than the monarch.

Think not, my countrymen, that I am pleading to you for freedom. Whether you grant it or withhold it now, it is sure to come. But when I am gone you will reflect that I go not to a bed of roses, but to a couch made of iron, around which mighty shadows lurk. Pardon me for so long detaining you, but remember me in the days to come as one who forgives you in your errors, and who bears you no ill-will."

While the prince had been speaking, two men had joined the group at the doorway, Ned Strong and Norman Benedict. They gazed with amazement on the scene before them. Pushing his way through the yielding throng, Ned Strong stood before the prince.

"Count Szalaki," he exclaimed, extending his hand, "this is the last place on earth in which I had expected to find you. But, as your host, I give you welcome."

"Mr. Strong!" cried Prince Carlo, in astonishment: "I do not understand. You say I am your guest?"

Ned Strong smiled grimly as he cast his eyes over the group of startled Rexanians.

"I fear," he sad, sarcastically, "that my welcome cannot include so large a party. I suppose,' he went on, addressing Posadowski, who had not slunk back into the throng, "I suppose that Rudolph Smolenski is responsible for your presence here?"

The arch-conspirator bowed sullenly.

"And who is this man, my guest—Count Szalaki?" asked Strong, sternly.

"He is the Crown Prince Carlo, heir-apparent to the throne of Rexania," answered Posadowski, a note of triumph in his voice.

Ned Strong turned and met the large, sad

eyes of the youth who had been relegated in his mind to that *terra incognita* where frauds and adventurers lurk and plot. The blood rushed to his face as he realized that his recent words of welcome had been tipped with sarcasm wrought by suspicion.

"Permit me to explain, Mr. Strong," remarked Prince Carlo, quietly, while Norman Benedict, glancing excitedly at his watch, pushed forward toward the central group. "These men are dreamers. Less mad than yonder suicide, whose death shall serve them for a warning and a sign, they plot to change the laws of God and man. How they learned my secret matters not. All that is essential now is that a power greater than earth holds has rendered vain their plots and schemes and crimes. Let them reflect upon the mystery that surrounds the ways of God. They brought me to this house. Behold, I find myself the guest of the one man in many millions I have cause to call my friend! One of their brethren breaks through yonder window, bent upon my death. As I stand erect before him, the bullet that was meant for me goes crashing through his brain! Oh, blind and foolish children, learn that there are mysteries ye cannot solve. Plot no longer to change the fate of the country you have wronged, a country that found you faithless years ago and drove you from her heart. You love Rexania? Then show your love by leaving to her loyal sons her future and the future of my house. No man can serve two masters. Faithful to the land of your adoption, you cannot also be of service to Rexania. Abandon your plots and stratagems, and abide by the lesson of this night's work.

Farewell.—Mr. Strong, I am at your service."

Prince Carlo turned abruptly from his countrymen and placed his hand upon Ned Strong's arm. The latter looked about him for Norman Benedict, but the reporter had disappeared.

"Prince Carlo," said Ned Strong, "I will take you to the lodge, where my sister will be very glad to renew her acquaintance with you."

"Miss Strong is here?" exclaimed the prince, eagerly. "Indeed, the Fates are kind to me to-night." A smile of delight played over his pale, drawn face.

"Will you wait here until I return?" asked Ned Strong of Posadowski. "There are several matters about which I must consult you." He made a gesture toward a black shadow in a corner near the window.

"I will stay here with two or three of my men," answered the arch-conspirator deferentially. "We are truly anxious, Mr. Strong, to save you from all further annoyance."

As Prince Carlo and Ned Strong crossed the lawn and made toward the lodge, they found themselves followed by several Rexanians, who clung close to them but maintained a respectful silence. Suddenly Ned Strong turned and faced them.

"What will you have?" he asked, angrily. "Is it not enough that you have been kidnappers and housebreakers, without becoming permanent nuisances?"

"Pardon us, Mr. Strong," answered the gigantic Posnovitch, deferentially; "we have no wish to annoy you, but it is fitting that

the Crown Prince of Rexania should have a body-guard."

Ned Strong placed his hand upon the arm of his royal friend.

"Your countrymen, Prince Carlo," he murmured, "are strangely inconsistent. They would crucify you at one moment and crown you the next."

"'Tis true, my friend," returned the prince sadly. "They illustrate the fickleness of the human race both in its dealings with kings and with God. But God reigns, and kings still live."

At this moment they entered the corridor of the lodge and groped their way toward the room in which Kate Strong and Mrs. Brevoort listened apprehensively to the sounds of approaching footsteps.

CHAPTER XXIII.

"COUNT SZALAKI!"

To the men who heard Kate Strong utter that name there was nothing but amazement in her voice, but to the sympathetic ear of Mrs. Brevoort there was that in her friend's outcry that was of more significance than mere surprise.

Rudolph's parlor presented at that instant a picturesque appearance. At the doorway leading into the corridor stood Prince Carlo and Ned Strong, while in the dim light behind them could be seen the grim faces of several Rexanians. Kate Strong, her cheeks pale from the nervous strain of recent events, but with eyes that gleamed with delight at this moment, was seated on the sofa, facing the doorway, while Mrs. Brevoort stood by her side, her hand resting on the girl's shoulder.

The Rexanian prince crossed the room hurriedly, and, bending down with infinite grace, kissed Kate's upraised hand.

"Your brother told me you were here," he said, and added, with convincing simplicity, "His words made me very happy."

Ned Strong had approached the little group.

"Mrs. Brevoort," he said, with great solemnity, "permit me to present to you"—here he glanced at Kate for an instant—"permit me

to present to you the Crown Prince Carlo of Rexania."

A tinge of red appeared in the royal youth's pale cheeks as he gracefully acknowledged Ned's words of introduction. Amazement, perhaps dismay, was written on Kate Strong's face. She was looking up at the Rexanian questioningly.

"You are a long way from home, your royal highness," exclaimed Mrs. Brevoort, a mischievous gleam in her eyes. "But I am pleased to see you again."

"We have met before, then?" inquired the prince, a puzzled look on his face.

"No, but I have not forgotten your face. I saw you at the head of your troops in Rexopolis, two years ago. I did not then imagine that I should ever meet you in such a place as this."

"The unhappy chance that brought me here has, I assure you, its compensation," returned the prince, smilingly, as he turned and looked down into the troubled face of Kate Strong.

"Sit down here by me," said the girl, to whom conflicting emotions had come as an antidote to physical pain. She had almost forgotten that her sprained ankle was aching stubbornly. "I want you to tell me what has happened to you since we last met. You owe me an apology, you know. But wait; I had almost forgotten. Are you really the crown prince? Then, of course, I have no right to ask for an explanation. The king can do no wrong, I believe."

Prince Carlo seated himself by her side, while a sad smile crossed his pale face.

"How out of place the old ideas appear!"

he exclaimed. "But, frankly, it has been a heavy cross to me, Miss Strong, to feel that you might wonder at my lack of courtesy. But I have been a helpless prisoner in the hands of yonder men."

Kate looked at him wonderingly.

"Tell me, Prince Carlo," she said, in a low voice, "tell me, what did they wish with you?"

Prince Carlo glanced searchingly around the room before replying. Mrs. Brevoort and Ned Strong were standing near the doorway, talking to the Rexanians who had appointed themselves a body-guard to their recent prisoner.

"They would have me," he answered gloomily, "betray my trust and leave my country to chaos and despair."

Her eyes sought his, but he failed to meet her gaze.

"And you—you will go back to Rexania?" she asked falteringly.

"It is imperative," he answered, knowing that her eyes were upon his face, but keeping his gaze fixed on the shadows that lurked in the corners of the room. "Already it may be too late for me to undo the damage these men have wrought. What has happened in Rexopolis I do not know, but I dread to learn the truth." He turned and looked down into her face. She smiled up at him sadly.

"I am very sorry for you," she whispered. What she meant by the words she hardly knew. The world seemed topsy-turvy to her fevered mind. Her life, usually so uneventful, had been filled this day with startling events, and she was worn with physical pain and the turmoil of conflicting emotions.

She wondered vaguely that she had not been more surprised to learn that the heir-apparent to a European throne had been a prisoner in the house where she was born. She realized with annoyance that her mind refused to confine itself to the bare facts presented to it, but showed an inclination to make short journeys into the realms of dreams and fancies.

Prince Carlo was gazing into her eyes earnestly.

"Your sympathy is very sweet to me," he said, in a voice that was vibrant with suppressed longing. "How much it means to me—may I tell you?"

His voice had sunk to a whisper.

"If you wish," she murmured, her lips trembling as she spoke.

"It means," he went on firmly, "a glimpse of a paradise I may never seek. It means that I look at the fairest sight on earth through the bars of an iron cage. It means that I will treasure in my heart, through all the dark, grim years that call to me, a memory that shall be to me the brightest gem of life. It means, Miss Strong, that I, a king, am more blessed by those dear words you spoke than by all the tawdry glory of my throne and crown."

He was silent, and the girl placed a cold hand in his for an instant and then withdrew it quickly.

"We have taken the liberty, your royal highness," said Mrs. Brevoort breezily, as she and Ned Strong crossed the room, "of sending one of your attendants to New Rochelle for a carriage. It seems that Rudolph," she continued, glancing at Kate,

"has made his escape in the vehicle that waited outside. And now we are anxious to discover if your lodge-keeper left anything to eat in the house. It is absolutely necessary that we fortify ourselves in some way for the ride before us."

The crown prince had arisen and beckoned to the towering Posnovitch, who blocked the doorway.

"Go up to the house, man, and tell Posadowski to send us whatever he has to eat and drink. I believe," he continued, smiling at Mrs. Brevoort, "that we are not in imminent danger of starving to death."

"And may I repay your present hospitality, your royal highness," cried Mrs. Brevoort gayly, "by numbering you among my guests at dinner to-morrow?"

Prince Carlo glanced furtively at the averted face of Kate Strong, as he said, in a voice in marked contrast to the sprightly tones in which the invitation had been extended to him:

"I am very sorry, Mrs. Brevoort, to be obliged to decline your hospitality, but—but I shall sail for Europe early to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HALF an hour later a carriage drew up at the lodge gate. A cold supper, of which Mrs. Brevoort and Ned Strong had partaken with forced gayety, had vindicated Prince Carlo's assertion that the danger of immediate starvation had never been imminent. But the sound of carriage-wheels came as a great relief to them all, for the gloomy features of their environment had been emphasized as time passed by. Ned Strong had held a whispered consultation in the corridor with Posadowski, who had come down from the manor-house for instructions, and the train of thought suggested by his visit had not tended to decrease the melancholy nature of their surroundings.

As the carriage rolled away from the lodge entrance, with Mrs. Brevoort and Ned Strong facing Kate and Prince Carlo, who occupied the back seat, a simultaneous sigh of relief broke from the quartette.

"This is a new sensation," whispered Mrs. Brevoort to Ned Strong. "Breaking jail with a captive prince! Is it not delightful?"

"Which is the captive prince?" returned Ned, bending down to get a better view of her face.

"Never mind," she answered. "I was about to say that nobody fully appreciates freedom until he has spent a certain amount of time in captivity."

Her remark silenced the youth for a moment. The longer he weighed it, the more discouraging did it seem to him.

"Perhaps," he suggested, "there may be a vast difference in jailers."

"Ah, but you beg the question," exclaimed Mrs. Brevoort argumentatively.

"I fear," he put in, hastily, "that that is all I have the courage to do with it. There is always safety in begging a question. Such a course at least defers the day of doom."

Mrs. Brevoort laughed outright, and looked up at Ned Strong mockingly.

"Are you threatened with a day of doom, Mr. Strong?"

"Perhaps," he answered mournfully. Then he exclaimed, with cheerfulness, "At all events, it is to be preceded by an evening of perfect bliss." She drew a bit closer to him at the words, as if to emphasize their truth.

The carriage, rolling noisily toward the city, contained at that moment a condensed illustration of the curious vagaries that pertain to human affairs. Cupid was perched upon the box beside the driver, and chuckled mischievously to himself as he realized what was going on within the vehicle. Well he knew, the little rascal, that two of his victims looked into the future with hope and joy. The other arrows that he had used had made wounds for which time could promise no relief. But it is in such contrasts as these that Cupid finds the pleasure of his impish life. The humdrum contentment that would have made the quartette less romantic but more evenly blessed would have bored Cupid with the crowd. He would have placed a

substitute upon the box, and have flown away, to continue his sport with deluded human hearts, where he could see his victims wince beneath his shafts.

"Tell me," said Prince Carlo, "why you are so silent. Are you in great pain?" His voice had in it a caressing note as he whispered to Kate Strong and tried to look into her downcast face.

"I hardly know," she answered wearily. "I feel very tired."

What had been to the prince a shadowy temptation, painting day-dreams before his eyes, as he gazed that afternoon on the sun-kissed waters of the Sound, had taken to itself a concrete form. Here beside him was the one woman in all the world for whom he would willingly renounce all the glittering but unsubstantial glory of his kingship. He had said, on the impulse of the moment, that he would go back to the troubled land to which his duty called him; but his heart rebelled against his avowed purpose as he held Kate Strong's cold hand for a moment in his as the carriage rumbled onward toward the beckoning lights of the great city. The girl withdrew her hand. He did not know how great an effort it had cost her to repress a sob.

Presently Kate looked up at him, her eyes bright with the emotion she controlled.

"In Rexopolis," she said, "there is great disorder. The newspapers this morning printed long accounts of what they called a crisis at your capital."

Prince Carlo was silent for a moment. His worst forebodings seemed about to be realized.

"And what of my father?" he asked, at length, his voice trembling perceptibly.

"He is very ill," she answered. Suddenly he felt her hand in his again.

"And the people grow restless? Tell me, is it so?"

"Yes," she answered.

"And the wonder grows that I, the crown prince, do not show myself?"

"Yes."

They sat speechless for a time, hand clasped in hand. The sympathy of this woman was very sweet to the self-exiled prince at this dark crisis in his life.

"It is so hard," he murmured. "Tell me," he whispered, hoarsely, bending close to her and looking down into her pale, drawn face —tell me, Miss Strong, what must I do? I tremble at the thoughts that fill my mind. Tell me—for you must know what I would say—what must I do?"

She was silent for an instant, and he knew that she trembled with emotion. Then her eyes sought his in the dim half-light, and she said, firmly:

"There is no choice, Prince Carlo. You would never be happy should you not go back."

"But why?" he argued. "To what do I go back? Surely not to happiness?"

"No," she answered, sadly. "You go back to—honor."

"To honor," he admitted, and then muttered, "and to death."

Her hand pressed his with feverish force. "Death is better than——" She paused suddenly.

"Than what?" he exclaimed.

"Death," she said, firmly, "is better than disgrace."

Prince Carlo sank back in his seat, his face white against the cushions.

"You speak the truth," he murmured, restlessly. "I really have no choice. To stay here is dishonor, to return is death. God help me!" His words sounded more like a groan than like a prayer.

They had reached the stone pavements of the city. The carriage jolted annoyingly over the ill-laid streets.

Prince Carlo leaned down until his face was close to Kate's.

"You are a grand, a noble woman," he whispered. "Remember, dear, for all time my heart is yours, and yours alone. Whatever Fate may have in store for me, it cannot deprive me of this one sweet thought. I love you, my darling, I love you!"

Her hand was like ice in his, and she spoke not, but he knew that she wept softly.

A moment later, the carriage drew up in front of Gerald Strong's house.

"Let me see you once more alone before I go," whispered Prince Carlo. "I have one thing more to say to you."

She pressed his hand in acquiescence. An instant later, the driver opened the carriage door, and Cupid with a mocking laugh flitted from the box, rejoicing at the mischief he had wrought.

CHAPTER XXV.

NORMAN BENEDICT had reached the office of the *Trumpet* in time to add a startling feature to the ten o'clock "extra" of that enterprising journal. A long cable despatch from Rexopolis, announcing the death of King Sergius III., the vain clamorings of the people for the appearance of his successor, the still popular Prince Carlo, and the certainty of an immediate choice by the populace of a provisional President, was of itself sufficient to make the "extra" notable. But Benedict had been enabled, by a combination of foresight and good luck, to give the readers of the *Trumpet* a startling explanation of Prince Carlo's absence from Rexopolis at this great crisis. On the night upon which Prince Carlo had lost a kingdom, Norman Benedict had gained a promotion.

Gerald Strong and his wife had sat in their library late that evening, wondering why Ned and Kate had not returned, when the butler brought in to them the late edition of a newspaper whose startling head-lines seemed to tremble with excitement. They had barely finished reading the astounding details of a pregnant international crisis, when the arrival of the carriage that bore to their door a dethroned king, a fatherless youth, upon whose shoulders rested a great burden demanding an heroic sacrifice, broke in upon ther conversation.

While the somewhat disjointed explana-

tions of the truants were doing their utmost to add to the confusion of Mrs. Strong's mind, her husband had taken Prince Carlo by the hand, and, telling Ned to accompany them, had led the guest he had known as Count Szalaki into the library.

"I have read the whole story," said the banker, when they found themselves alone. "You have suffered a great wrong, Prince Carlo. You have my heartfelt sympathy."

He took the young man's hand, and continued, very gently, "I have sad news for you."

Prince Carlo gazed at him with eyes that were full of agony.

"He is dead?"

"Yes," answered Gerald Strong. "He died this afternoon."

A change came over the face of the son of kings. The dread certainty that confronted him seemed to affect him like a call to arms. He stood more erect, the lines around his mouth grew firm, and his voice was cold and hard, as he said:

"Mr. Strong, may I ask you to tell me all that you have heard?"

"You will find the facts, as far as they are known, in this dispatch from Rexopolis."

Prince Carlo took the newspaper and eagerly perused the two columns outlining the situation at his capital. While he was reading, Ned Strong said to his father:

"How did you know, father, that Count Szalaki was the crown prince?"

"The *Trumpet*, Ned, has a long account of the occurrences that have made our manor-house unpleasantly notorious."

"Ha!" cried Ned. "Our friend Mr. Benedict has been very energetic."

"Furthermore," continued Mr. Strong, "I have several dispatches to-day from our representative in Vienna, who has been clever enough to suspect that Count Szalaki might be the Crown Prince Carlo."

An exclamation of mingled astonishment and anger broke from Prince Carlo at this moment.

"Fejeravy!" he cried. "Fejeravy for President! It is impossible! Traitor! Fejeravy, whom we have trusted for years as our most loyal subject! It is incredible!"

Prince Carlo sank into a chair wearily. The treachery of the man who had been his father's closest adviser overwhelmed him for a moment. Suddenly he looked up at his host, his jaw firmly set and a gleam in his eyes that proved that a new incentive had come to him urging his return to his distracted fatherland.

"There is a steamer leaving for Southampton in the morning?" he asked, eagerly.

"Yes," answered Gerald Strong. Then he seated himself beside the prince, and said, gently:

"You will forgive me, Prince Carlo, if I take the liberty of a much older man, not well versed in the etiquette of courts, to ask you if your return at such a crisis as the present is not foolhardy?"

"Mayhap," cried the prince, a note of recklessness in his voice. "But think not that I am friendless because a few of my people have been tools in a traitor's hands. A hundred years ago the madmen of France informed the world that kings and their God were dead. Short-sighted, deluded dreamers! They slew in the name of Freedom, and

brought forth—Napoleon. I shall go back, not to bring peace, but a sword. Fools that they are, to think that my people, loving me, will listen forever to the voice of Fejeravy.—Fejeravy, the Judas of my house! It is not for naught that we who hold the thrones of Europe are bound together by the ties of blood. What madness blinds my people? If I were dead, mayhap their crazy scheme would have some hope of victory. But behind me, as my allies, stand all the kings and emperors of the world. At my back are armies before which Rexania's rabble rout would fly like chaff. Mad as was the scheme that sought to make me abdicate my throne to please the wishes of a few adventurous rebels in this New World that I shall never see again, it was not more futile than the effort of my people to set up for themselves a government against which every court in Europe will be arrayed."

Prince Carlo arose and paced the room restlessly. Gerald Strong and his son remained silent. They seemed to be gazing from a mountain-top upon some wild and bloody scene in ancient history. To these calm, unimpressionable Americans the future that called to this pale-faced youth seemed to be made of the warp and woof that form the texture of the visions of the night. Of what did he speak? Of an alien army under his command, placing him upon a throne stained with the blood of his own countrymen! He represented the very incarnation of Reaction calling with confidence upon its ancient allies, Blood and Iron. And yet he was a gentle youth. His smile was charming as he took the hand of his silent host and said:

"Forgive me for boring you with my selfish thoughts. You have been very kind. How much I thank you, I cannot say. And now, time presses. I have much to do, in small ways, before the steamer sails. May I trouble you to ask Miss Kate if I may say farewell?"

Ned Strong left the room and returned a moment later.

"My sister will see you in the drawing-room," he said as he re-entered the library. "And then, if you wish, I will place myself at your service, Prince Carlo, until your departure."

A moment later father and son were left alone. They remained silent for several minutes, attempting to readjust their wandering thoughts to the quiet exigencies of their own environment.

"I have another piece of news for you, father," said Ned, after a time.

"Yes?"

"I am sure," he explained, with an effort at playfulness, "that Mr. Benedict has not announced it in his 'extra.' Mrs. Brevoort has promised to be my wife."

Prince Carlo of Rexania stood for an instant, white and trembling, upon the steps that led from Gerald Strong's doorway. Upon his lips he still felt the kiss of a loving and sorrow-stricken girl. The bell in a distant church-steeple was striking midnight.

"Come," he said, gently, placing a hanp upon Ned Strong's arm,—"come, comrade, I need a friend to-night; for the world seems very sad."

THE END.

A PRINCESS OF THE RHINE.

CHAPTER I.

"THREE aces! Your majesty is in luck! Shall we make it a jack-pot?"

King Rudolph XII., of Hesse-Heilfels, solemnly acquiesced in this suggestion by a nod of his gray head. His small, greenish-gray eyes gleamed with excitement, and the flush on his heavily moulded face bore witness to the wicked joy he was deriving from a new game of chance. Rudolph was a true Schwartzburger in his fondness for gambling. There is a legend of the Rhine which tells how one of Rudolph's lineal ancestors, who occupied the throne of Hesse-Heilfels three centuries ago, lost his kingdom on a throw of the dice and his honor by a thrust of the sword. The courtier who had won a kingdom from his liege lord did not live to tell the tale of his good luck. The house of Schwartzburger has never neglected heroic measures when it has been confronted by a great crisis. To gamble with a king of Hesse-Heilfels has always required not only skill but courage.

That Jonathan Edwards Bennett, a rolling stone from Litchfield County, Connecticut,

United States of America, had dared to teach King Rudolph of Hesse-Heilfels the mysteries of the American game of poker, spoke well for the Yankee adventurer's boldness. One of the first stories that Bennett had been told upon entering Rudolph's kingdom had turned upon the fate of a commercial traveller from the United States who had managed to penetrate to the sacred presence of the testy monarch. The drummer had offered to equip the army of Hesse-Heilfels with bicycles at so low a figure that the suspicions of King Rudolph had been aroused. Becoming convinced by a series of searching questions that the commercial traveller could not fulfil the promises he had made, the proud but irascible Schwartzburger confiscated the Yankee's watch and loose change. He then gave orders that the stranger be driven beyond the borders of the kingdom. Rudolph XII. prided himself upon always being just, though he might be at times severe.

King Rudolph of Hesse-Heilfels and Jonathan Edwards Bennett of Connecticut played poker amid luxurious and romantic surroundings. The favorite castle of the Schwartzburgers caps a hill overlooking the distant Rhine, but somewhat out of the beaten line of travel. The Schwartzburgers have always cherished a dislike for tourists, and under Rudolph XII. the little kingdom of Hesse-Heilfels has been jealously guarded from the prying eyes of fussy travellers, who, as His Majesty had often remarked, were apt to lead the good people of the country into temptation. Four hundred years ago a Schwartzburger who had been crowned king of Hesse-Heilfels had said: "The divine right

to fleece resides in the person of the king, and when exercised by a subject becomes treason." One of the most learned professors at the University of Heidelberg some years ago wrote a treatise to prove that this remark was, on the face of it, an Irish bull, and could not, therefore, have been uttered by a King of Hesse-Heilfels. A great controversy over this question arose in the German universities, and the matter is still under discussion. It has served at least one valuable purpose, in furnishing another outlet for pent-up erudition. German scholarship needs constant relief of this kind, and what is known as the Schwartzburger Irish-Bull problem has been of great service to the congested erudition of the university towns.

The castle of the Schwartzburgers in which we find the reigning king pursuing his studies in poker under the tutorship of a wandering genius from Connecticut was built late in the thirteenth century, and "was restored," as the guide-books say, early in the present century by King Rudolph's father. "The restoration is incomplete," Bennett had said to the king, a few days after he had been admitted to the royal circle. "Your castle is picturesque but unhealthy, romantic but rheumatic, with too many relics and too few conveniences. What you need at once, your majesty, is sanitary plumbing, a few passenger and freight elevators, and an electric lighting plant."

King Rudolph had gazed suspiciously at the smooth-faced, smooth-tongued youth, whose nervously energetic manner was aggravated by his efforts to make his meaning clear in the German tongue. Bennett was a

well-equipped linguist, but the German dialect spoken in Hesse-Heilfels was new to him. He was by temperament loquacious and restless, and it annoyed him to find that his vocabulary was frequently defective when he was endeavoring to convince the king that a certain line of action was imperatively and immediately necessary. King Rudolph had rejected, for the time being, the suggestions thrown out by Bennett regarding repairs to the castle, and had devoted such hours as he could snatch from affairs of state to learning the ins and outs of the game of draw poker. The result was that Rudolph XII. and Jonathan Edwards Bennett spent twelve hours of every twenty-four in the king's private apartments—with royalty and democracy separated by only a table, a pack of cards, and a set of ivory chips. Already the kingdom had begun to feel the effects of Rudolph's example, for the palace sets the fashions in Hesse-Heilfels, and when the king plays poker in his castle the peasant in the valley is anxious to learn the difference between a royal flush and a full house. When Jonathan Edwards Bennett taught Rudolph XII., the reigning Schwartzburger, to play jack-pots he started a poker avalanche that poured down from the castle into the valleys and eventually caused the most serious upheaval in the modern history of the kingdom of Hesse-Heilfels.

"If your luck continues, your majesty," remarked Bennett, as he shuffled the cards and gazed thoughtfully through the open window toward the distant mountain-tops, "I shall be compelled to mortgage my farm in Litchfield County, Connecticut."

There was silence in the stately old chamber for a moment, broken only by the ticking of an antique clock that had punctuated the lives of many generations of Schwartzburgers. King Rudolph thrust a trembling hand through his scanty gray locks and smiled slyly.

"What's the farm worth?" he asked, eagerly seizing his five cards and looking at them anxiously.

The expression upon Bennett's clear-cut, pale, and rather handsome face did not change. He gazed stolidly at his hand, and calmly discarded three of his five cards. A close observer would have noted, however, that the dark eyes of the youth glanced now and then at the king's heavy countenance and seemed to read the very soul of his royal opponent.

"The farm is worth a contract to renovate your castle," answered the Yankee coldly.

"What do you mean?" cried the king, as he again added a small pile of Bennett's chips to his own store.

"I mean this, your majesty," answered the American. "I'll make a bet with you—the cards to decide the wager—by the terms of which you are bound to win. We'll throw a cold hand for the stakes. See? If your cards beat mine, you own my farm. If I win, you are to sign a contract authorizing me to take charge of the internal improvements not only of your castle but of your kingdom. I am to make this castle a modern residence, to improve the roads in your kingdom, and to put a little snap and ginger into your people. You are falling years behind other civilized lands. You need my services, your majesty, as a

Moses who shall lead you out of the desert of the past into the flowery plains of the future. See? It was a lucky day for you when I entered your kingdom."

The Schwartzburgers have never been noted for quick-wittedness. Their minds have always moved slowly, unless their temper was aroused. The only way to make a Schwartzburger think and act hastily is to stir up his anger. At this moment Rudolph XII. was gazing at the Yankee in a dazed way. He seemed to be striving dully to find a ray of light by which to throw the American's startling proposition into effective relief. He evidently harbored a vague suspicion that he was in imminent danger of losing his royal and time-honored prerogative of fleecing the wandering sheep that came within his reach. The idea of subletting a portion of his royal authority to a comparative stranger was not attractive. Furthermore, King Rudolph realized that by delegating to Bennett the authority he craved, he would arouse the antagonism of the most influential and powerful subjects of his realm.

Nevertheless, the king of Hesse-Heilfels was fascinated by the chance of winning an estate in America. To his mind "a farm in Connecticut" represented a domain from which vast wealth might be derived. Rumors of the fabulous riches possessed by American tourists who had at times visited his castle had made a strong impression upon King Rudolph. Furthermore, the microbe of poker was at work in the royal blood. The fever caused by jack-pot germs was having its delirious influence upon the king's mind.

"By a cold hand," remarked the king slowly, "you mean that we stake everything on one deal?"

"Yes," answered Bennett, "we throw the cards face upward and make our discards openly. It is very simple. Shall I proceed?"

At that instant the doors behind Bennett's chair were thrown open and a girl of eighteen hastily entered the apartment. The American turned toward her, flushed perceptibly, and arose from his seat.

The Princess Hilda, the king's niece, paid not the slightest attention to Bennett, but approached the king with a look of determination upon her handsome face. Her cheeks were slightly reddened from excitement, and her dark blue eyes seemed almost black as they rested upon her royal uncle. There was silence for an instant. The opening of the doors had tempted a breeze from the mountains to enter the palace through the windows and shake the antique hangings as it passed. It caressed Hilda's golden hair gently as she stood before the king and said:

"Pardon me, your majesty, but I have news—state news—that brooks no delay. No other messenger seemed quite fitted for the task, so I have come to tell you that——"

King Rudolph raised his hand with an angry gesture.

"You must wait, princess. Is it not enough that I should be vexed with cares of state by my ministers and secretaries without being interrupted in my too few hours of relaxation by you? Furthermore, there *is* an affair of state—a most important affair of state—here at issue at this moment. Come, mein Herr Bennett, throw the cards! Wait, Hilda, do

not be offended! Watch my luck, princess! You shall stand here to bring me good fortune. Whichever way it goes, you say, mein Herr, I win? So be it! I take your word! Let's draw. Forgive me, princess; I know your news will keep."

CHAPTER II.

"PARDON me, your majesty," said Bennett, holding a pack of cards unshuffled in his hand. "I hesitate to cross your will, but if the princess really has important news——?"

The speaker looked up at the Princess Hilda deferentially, but his intercession in her behalf met with no reward. Far from seeming pleased at his support, she turned her back upon him, her face white and set, and gazed reproachfully at her king and uncle.

"Throw out the cards," commanded King Rudolph sternly. "Am I to be told by a chit of a girl how to rule my kingdom? Remain where you are, Princess Hilda, and see me win a province in the land across the sea."

The little group at that moment presented a picturesque tableau. In that old castle within which the centuries had seen enacted many tragedies, comedies, farce-comedies, and burlesques, lost to the world forever for lack of imminent playwrights, an episode in a stirring drama was about to take place against an appropriate *mise-en-scène.*

The king's face, flushed with the excitement of the crisis, wore an expression of mingled cupidity and impatience. His fat, reddish hand rapped the table nervously. Opposite to him sat Bennett, a prey to con-

flicting emotions, but outwardly calm. He had hitherto been too much occupied in gaining an influence over King Rudolph to notice the beauty of Princess Hilda, but as she stood there, cold, disdainful, silent, while the breeze gently caressed her golden-brown hair, the American adventurer felt tempted to throw the mischievous cards into the king's face and beg forgiveness from the princess on his bended knees.

"Count von Hohenlinden," began the princess stubbornly.

The king put up his hand deprecatingly.

"The Count von——!" Princess Hilda got no further.

"I draw to my pair of knaves," cried King Rudolph, thrusting three useless cards aside excitedly.

"You do, indeed," said Hilda, under her breath, and glancing pointedly at Bennett. She had not lowered her voice sufficiently to prevent the American from catching the drift of her remark. He tossed three cards toward the king.

"Four of a kind!" cried the delighted Schwartzburger, pointing at the cards triumphantly. "My jacks will take your farm, Herr Bennett."

"But I draw to queens," remarked the American quietly and casting a quick glance at Princess Hilda. "Ha, was I not right? Are not the queens on my side? Look at that, your majesty! Four queens! I win my contract. Das ist wahr!"

King Rudolph gazed blankly at the cards before him. By a marvellous stroke of luck the American had beaten the king's four jacks. Novice though he was at poker, the

Schwartzburger realized that he had lost the stakes at a moment when the chances were a thousand to one in his favor.

"Gott im Himmel!" he cried angrily, hurling the pack of cards through the window, while his greenish-gray eyes glared fiercely at his opponent, "what mad devil is in the cards?"

"I had wonderful luck," said Bennett gently, rising from his seat and glancing imploringly at the princess.

"The Count von Hohenlinden, Your Majjesty," cried Hilda, paying no attention to Bennett.

King Rudolph arose from his chair. He was a short, thickset man, clumsy in movement, and much too heavy for his height.

"Will you be quiet, niece?" he exclaimed, his breath coming and going with asthmatic friction. "Let me understand this gentleman. Herr Bennett, you have won the cold hand——"

"And the marble heart," muttered Bennett mournfully.

"As I understand it," went on the king, „you purpose to put this castle and the roads, parks, bridges, and forests of my kingdom into a condition more worthy of the nineteenth century than is their present status. Am I right?"

"That is the proposition, your majesty."

"But there are many difficulties in the way, Herr Bennett. I will meet with resistance at every point. I have ministers—a prime minister, heads of departments, red tape, precedent, national prejudice, and a large family of impecunious relatives, already in alliance against you and your projects.

Ach Himmel! I thought my four jacks would solve my difficulties—and now I am worse off than ever."

The Princess Hilda had retired to a window and was gazing pensively out upon hills and valleys over which the Schwartzburgers had lorded it for many generations. Here and there between the hills she could catch a glimpse of the stately Rhine, as it flowed serenely past the castellated summits where Romans, Teutons, and tourists had fussed and fretted through the centuries. Suddenly the king turned toward her.

"Count von Hohenlinden," he cried. "You spoke of him, my princess. He is my financier. I need his advice. Have you news of him, Hilda?" The princess turned and approached the king.

"The countess came to me this morning in tears," she said quietly. "Count von Hohenlinden has gone."

"Gone?" cried King Rudolph in amazement. "Gone where?"

"No one knows. I fear, your majesty—I fear from what the countess said—that—that—he is a defaulter."

"Mein Gott! Mein Gott!" exclaimed the king, sinking into a chair. "It cannot be! And yet—and yet—he had full control of my treasury. He told me yesterday—but what matters it what he said then? Call von Schwalbach to me. I tell you, Herr Bennett, if my prime minister has allowed the count to loot my treasury I will have his life. Quick! call a page and send him for von Schwalbach."

"Alas, your majesty," said the princess soothingly, "von Schwalbach has also disap-

peared. It is said that he and the count left the kingdom last night, riding their wheels through a secret pass in the hills."

The countenance of royalty had turned white with dismay. The king seemed to be stricken helpless at one blow.

"My best friends gone," he muttered. "Gone—thieves that run off in the night! And I—I have trusted them with my purse, my honor, my very life. Tell me, Hilda," he went on, almost hysterically, "what caused this downfall of men whose word was always as good as gold, men who have been found faithful to their trust for years?"

The broken king looked up pathetically at his golden-haired niece. She smiled sadly down at him, and then turned frowningly toward Bennett, who stood, with one hand resting upon the card-table, watching the melancholy scene before him.

"One thing alone caused the ruin of the men you trusted," she said, and paused.

"And that was?" cried the king eagerly.

"Poker!" answered the princess simply.

Bennett stepped back as though struck by a blow in the face, while the king sprang to his feet and puffed helplessly for a moment.

"Donner und Blitzen!" blurted King Rudolph, shaking his fist at the American, whose white lips and flushed cheeks gave evidence of his inward agitation. "You are responsible for this, Herr Bennett! You sneak into my kingdom and tell me you have news from a better world than mine. You tell me that I and my people are 'behind the times.' I give you room in my palace and you complain that we have no gas, no electricity, no telephones, no cable cars to climb the hills,

no new castles. All is old, you whisper, time-worn, covered with lichen, useless, dead. And I, the only fool of all the Schwartzburgers, listen to you and grow cold to my old counsellors. You talk of progress—and give me poker. You speak of grandeur—and make me a gambler. You point to a rainbow—and pick my pockets. It is enough. I have learned my lesson. Go, Herr Bennett—and may the curse of the King of Hesse-Heilfels be with you to the end."

King Rudolph sank back into his chair, panting for breath.

At this instant a man burst into the room unannounced, dragging with him a page who had sought to check his impetuosity.

The intruder was a comical figure at his most dignified moments, but at this instant he looked as if he had escaped from a light opera company, just when the audience was roaring at his best joke. He was not over four feet three in height. His hair was tousled and of a light yellow hue. His features were large, especially his nose. Under the influence of great excitement his eyes bulged from his head as if in search of mislaid spectacles. He was attired in a green velvet jacket and small clothes, with a frilled shirt and a small sword at his side. In his hand he carried a green cap, from which a long black feather trailed along the floor.

"Your majesty, pardon me," he cried, falling upon one knee before the king. "I protest to the throne. I know that I am right! Nicht wahr?"

In spite of the solemnity of the crisis, King Rudolph laughed aloud, the Princess Hilda

smiled, and an expression of hope rested upon Jonathan Bennett's disturbed countenance. The sudden change in the king's mood was encouraging.

"Rise, Cousin Fritz," said the king jocosely. "You never appeal to the king in vain. What is your grievance. Perhaps your troubles may prove for the moment a counter-irritant to mine."

"Because I'm called the king's jester, Your Majesty, they think I'm a fool," said the little man, readjusting the feather in his cap. "But I'm not the fool that I look, am I, Schwartzburg?" Here the dwarf winked gayly at the king. Then his anger seemed to return. "Gott im Himmel!" he cried, "they gave me the lie, me, Cousin Fritz, who could tell the truth in Latin and Greek at the age of six. It's an outrage, your majesty."

"But what was the cause of all this?" asked the king, beginning to look bored and casting uneasy glances at Bennett, upon whom the royal curse had not had the intended effect.

"The cause, your majesty?" repeated the dwarf. "Cause enough. They said I lied when I told them that four of a kind beat a full house. Think of that, Herr Bennett. They took my money—and I held four aces."

CHAPTER III.

"BENNETT '82 cannot be explained by any known law," a Yale professor had once remarked. "He may astonish the world by his genius, or end a short career as a tramp. The splendor of his inherent possibilities emphasizes the dangers that surround such a temperament as his."

Ten years had passed since Bennett had been graduated, not without honors, from Yale, but he had not as yet fulfilled the professor's prophecy. He had not made the world ring with his name; neither had he sunk to the level of a knight of the road. There still remained a chance, however, that the foresight of the professor would be vindicated. Bennett was now thirty-two years of age. He had assiduously cultivated the gifts that had led the Yale professor to ascribe to him the peculiarities and possibilities that appertain to genius. Bennett had become an accomplished linguist, a poet, a musician, a diplomatist, and a schemer. But he had neglected the means and methods that lead to permanent success, and his love of adventure had served to make him more of a tramp than a celebrity. The returns from his genius must still be marked "scattering."

The erratic nature of the man was well illustrated by his invasion of the kingdom of Hesse-Heilfels. One evening in Berlin he

had listened to a description of King Rudolph's picturesque domain. The eccentricities of that petty monarch had aroused Bennett's curiosity, and he had determined to make a study at close quarters of a royal establishment that still retained many of the peculiarities of mediæval monarchies.

Bennett had been fortunate enough to find luck as his ally upon entering the confines of Hesse-Heilfels. At the very first inn in the kingdom in which he had laid aside his knapsack, he had learned that King Rudolph was suffering from a severe indisposition that had baffled the skill of the court physicians. It did not take Bennett long to come to the conclusion that the reigning Schwartzburger was suffering from inflammatory rheumatism, an affection that Bennett numbered among his family heirlooms. "Litchfield County may be short on romance, but it is long on rheumatism," he said to himself. "I think I can cure King Rudolph."

There is no necessity for dwelling upon the details of Bennett's success as a court physician. He had written a carefully worded letter offering his services to the afflicted monarch "free of charge unless a cure is effected." King Rudolph, weary of suffering and disgusted with the impotence of his own doctors, had sent for the young American and, much to the astonishment and annoyance of the court, had given him full charge of his royal person. The cure effected by the gifted amateur had won him the friendship of the king, and the enmity of the court circle. In spite of his suavity, Bennett had been unable to make himself popular in a household in which the good-will of the king

must be purchased at the expense of general detestation. The feeling against Bennett was intensified, of course, because of his foreign birth. Never before, in the long and polychromatic history of the House of Schwartzburg, had a stranger from a land far over sea become at a bound an influential factor in shaping the destinies of the kingdom of Hesse-Heilfels. Upon the door of his bedchamber one morning, Bennett had found inscribed in chalk, the words, "Geben sie acht. Halt!" The warning had opened his eyes to the fact that the enemies he had made were bold and determined. But he had smiled mockingly, rubbed the chalk from the panel, and made his way, humming a merry catch, to the king's apartments.

Nevertheless Bennett was not in a joyous mood as he gazed at the moon-kissed river and mountains from a balcony adjoining his apartments on the evening of the day upon which our tale opens. Although the king had apologized in the afternoon for his bitter denunciation of the American in the morning, Bennett realized that his hold upon royal favor was insecure, and that as Rudolph's rheumatism improved, and his fondness for poker decreased, the end of his adventure would impend.

Twenty-four hours before this Bennett would have felt no special annoyance had a decree of perpetual banishment from the kingdom of Hesse-Heilfels been enforced against him. But as he puffed cigar smoke into the balmy air and gazed dreamily at the silver thread that gleamed between the distant hills, the face of the Princess Hilda—proud, cold, and beautiful—seemed to taunt

him, defy him, fascinate him. His pulse beat wildly as the temptation to break this haughty woman's pride, to make her eyes grow gentle at his approach and her lips melt into smiles as he addressed her, swept over him.

The hopelessness of his longing was clear to him. The princess looked upon him as a quack, an adventurer, a man to be shunned and despised. She had never vouchsafed to him a word, a glance, the slightest recognition of his existence. To win her regard seemed to be impossible. The sceptre of Hesse-Heilfels was as much within his reach as the good-will of the Princess Hilda. Nevertheless, Jonathan Bennett, soothed by tobacco, lulled by the glories of a summer night, haunted by the swarming spirits of the storied Rhine, dreamed his dream of love and conquest and allowed his wild fancies to lead him far from the vulgar plane of poker, sanitary plumbing, and "sure cures" for rheumatism.

"Ach, mein Herr, but you look like an archangel planning a crime."

Bennett sprang up from his seat in dismay. He had carefully locked the doors of his apartments, and this sudden invasion of his privacy smacked of the supernatural. Cousin Fritz, with a mocking smile playing across his gnarled face, displayed a mischievous joy in the American's consternation.

"Be seated, Herr Bennett," cried the dwarf, bowing with exaggerated politeness. "I owe you an apology—but this is one of my jokes. Is it not a good one? Ha—ha!" He danced up and down the balcony with weird agility for a moment. Then he seated himself upon

the stone coping and tilted his feathered cap sideways upon his overgrown head.

"You will forgive me," said Bennett gently, offering the jester a cigar, which the latter accepted with much ceremony, "if I ask you how you managed to surprise me so successfully?"

Cousin Fritz winked knowingly and blew a cloud of smoke into the air.

"I've lived in this castle a thousand years," he answered solemnly. "It has taken me all that time to learn its secrets. Hist, Herr Bennett, they think it's my business to amuse the king. Nonsense. That's my pleasure. My work for a thousand years has been to discover all the mysteries of this old castle. I know them all know now. What is the result? I'll tell you, Herr Bennett, and I'll tell you why I tell you. You made those scoundrels return my money this afternoon. Four aces! The robbers! But they took your word on poker, Herr Bennett—although they hate you. Do you hear me? They hate you."

The dwarf chuckled with inward glee. He seemed to rejoice in Bennett's unpopularity.

"And what," asked Bennett, not wholly pleased with the jester's untimely jocularity, "what has been the result of your thousand years of discovery in this ancient pile? You started out to tell me."

"It has been," answered the dwarf, seeming to weigh his words carefully, "it has been to make me king. These puppets come and go and wear the crown and hold the sceptre, but through the centuries I am monarch of Hesse-Heilfels. I could tell you tales that would make your black hair turn white, tales of my power—of *my* power, the

jester, Cousin Fritz, a buffoon for a thousand years!"

There was something so uncanny in the little wizard's words and manner that Bennett could hardly repress a gesture of abhorrence. A madman smoking a cigar in the moonlight on a balcony overlooking the Rhine was a creature so out of touch with nineteenth-century ideas that Bennett was tempted to believe that he had fallen asleep and had been attacked by a nightmare.

Suddenly Cousin Fritz hopped down from his perch and sprang toward Bennett. The movement was so sudden that the American had no time to rise.

"Look there," whispered the dwarf, pointing with trembling hand toward a group of trees at the edge of the park, several hundred feet in front of them. "Do you see those shadows among the trees?"

Bennett's eyes followed the little man's gesture. He could make out the figures of several men who had gathered in a group beneath the trees. The moon painted their shadows black against the greensward.

"Do you know what they seek?" asked the dwarf, shaking with inward laughter. "They seek your life, Herr Bennett! Isn't that a joke? I couldn't make a better one, could I?"

The American felt an almost irresistible impulse to hurl the uncanny creature into the abyss beneath them. The dwarf's idea of humor did not appeal to Bennett. As a Yankee he possessed a keen appreciation of the ludicrous, but the prospect of assassination did not strike him as laughable. Cousin Fritz—abnormally sympathetic as he was—

realized that his companion was not in a joyous mood.

"Don't be alarmed, Herr Bennett"; he said, "what I tell you is true. I heard those men planning your death. They hate you because my cousin Rudolph has grown fond of you. But, never fear, I will save you from their machinations. Did I not tell you that I had been King of Hesse-Heilfels for a thousand years? Well, the king is on your side. I decree that you shall not die. Do you doubt my power to save you? Look here!"

The dwarf sprang with wonderful agility upon the coping and stood upright, his crooked figure standing out against the sky like a silhouette to the eyes of the astonished American. Seizing his cap the king's jester waved it frantically to and fro, as if making a signal to the men at the edge of the park.

"Come here, Herr Bennett," he cried. "See? Am I not king? Have they not obeyed my command? See? They are gone?"

Bennett gazed searchingly at the trees beneath which the group had stood but a moment before. There was nothing there but the moonlit glory of the forest.

CHAPTER IV.

"GUTE Nacht, Herr Bennett! Schlafen Sie wohl!"

The dwarf, smiling mischievously, disappeared through the entrance and Bennett closed the heavy oaken door and carefully bolted it. His madcap visitor had refused to satisfy his curiosity upon several important points, and the American made ready for bed with a disturbed mind. Was Cousin Fritz really his friend? That the dwarf was crazy he had no doubt, but his insanity was not dangerous if he was actually well disposed toward the stranger. But the dwarf's mysterious and sudden appearance, his signal to the men Bennett now called "the conspirators," and his stubborn refusal to answer the questions put to him, combined to cast a doubt upon his sincerity.

"The situation is certainly depressing," soliloquized Bennett, as he slowly doffed his clothes. "The king blows hot and cold, and, so far as I can learn, is handicapped by an empty treasury. The Princess Hilda holds me in contempt and suspicion. The crazy jester is not a safe ally. As for the court at large, there is not a man or woman in the circle who would not be glad to see me driven out of the kingdom. It is more than probable that there is a conspiracy on foot against my life. And what do I gain by re-

maining here? Not one glance from her wonderful eyes, not a smile from her sweet lips; nothing but cold, contemptuous indifference. Nobody, so far as I know, has ever called Jonathan Edwards Bennett a fool, but he deserves that name to-night. Heigh-ho! a rolling stone gathers no moss, but it gets a great many hard knocks."

With this melancholy reflection, Bennett, with a farewell glance at the moonlight pouring in at the windows—which he had taken care to fasten with bars—turned on his pillow and wooed the fickle goddess whose duty it is to reknit the raveled sleeve of care. He was about to win a great victory in his coquetting with sleep, when he was startled into a sitting posture by a rap on the panel of the door he had recently bolted.

Bennett's first thought was that he had fallen into a doze and had been the victim of a mild attack of nightmare. He listened intently. The breeze from the hills, defying the broken windows, stirred the heavy hangings surrounding his old-fashioned bed, and the mysterious noises that haunt an ancient castle at night fell upon his ear. Suddenly a gentle rap again echoed from the opposite side of the chamber. The American pushed aside his bed curtains and stole softly toward the door. The ease with which Cousin Fritz had defied bolts and bars had not tended to allay Bennett's growing distrust of his surroundings.

"Who's there?" he asked in a low voice as he reached the door. There was a silence for an instant. Bennett, who prided himself upon his courage, was ashamed to realize

that his heart was beating with an abnormal celerity.

"I come from the princess," answered a woman's voice. "I have a message for Herr Bennett."

"Wait just a moment, then," said the astonished American, hurrying toward the chair upon which he had placed his clothes. That Princess Hilda wished to communicate with him was a fact so surprising that his agitation increased. His hands trembled as he hurriedly donned his garments and endeavored to render his toilet worthy of the audience before him.

Presently he unbolted the great door, and against the moonlight that streamed through the corridor he saw the figure of one of the princess's waiting-women.

"Let us go as quietly as possible," she said. "The Princess Hilda will receive you in the Hall of Armor."

They crept softly along the corridor and down a flight of stone steps that seemed to lead them from the moonlight into the black depths of eternal gloom. The woman rapped on a small door at the foot of the stairway. As they awaited the answer to her signal, the thought flashed through Bennett's mind that he had placed himself in the power of those who might prove to be his enemies. He sought in vain to read the face of the woman at his side. Instinctively he placed his hand upon his hip pocket, in which he had always carried a revolver. A moment later he felt ashamed of his fears. The small door had been thrown back, and upon his startled gaze broke a vision that recalled his youthful dreams of romance.

Through the stained-glass windows of a great hall the moonlight streamed in multi-colored beams. Like a mediæval army mustered at midnight stood the grim figures of the armored Schwartzburgers. Long black shadows, weird and wavering, made effective background for the polychromatic glories of this dazzling scene.

And there in the foreground, the moonlight caressing her golden hair, stood the Princess Hilda, a vision of beauty amid the relics of old wars and the steel-clad presentments of her blood-stained ancestors. The clear-cut face, the stately figure, the regal simplicity of her attire, seemed to make her at that instant the very incarnation of all that was noblest in the mediæval cult. She appeared to be a spirit from the past haunting the scenes where chivalrous warriors in the days of old had paid the homage of death in return for the smile of love.

Bennett felt dazed by the unexpected beauty of the picture that met his eyes. For a moment he doubted the reality of the scene before him. Was he dreaming? Was it not certain that a love song, followed by a martial chorus, would soon recall him to his senses; that he would find himself not in a castle but in an opera house?

Suddenly the voice of the princess convinced him of the reality of his surroundings.

"Herr Bennett, accept my thanks. It was kind of you to come to me."

The words were unexpected. They placed the princess under obligation to a man she had hitherto treated with contemptuous indifference. But her voice was cold and for-

mal. Bennett realized that, like the figures of her ancestors, she was clad in armor. Theirs was of steel, hers of pride.

"It would be the greatest pleasure of my life to serve you, Princess Hilda," said the American, the tone of his voice leaving no doubt of his sincerity.

There was silence between them for a time. In some remote corner of the castle a door creaked on its hinges. The waiting-woman made a gesture of impatience somewhere in the shadows, and a piece of armor clanked angrily.

"If that is true," said the princess, with less coldness in her tones than before, "I shall put you to the test at once. Herr Bennett, I am in sore distress."

How great a sacrifice it was for this proud woman to meet him thus secretly and to confess that he could be of service to her in her hour of trouble, Bennett was sufficiently generous to realize. Irresponsible in many ways, brilliant but erratic, the American was essentially a gentleman. Furthermore, he had never felt for a woman the reverential admiration that the golden-haired vision before him inspired. There was something unearthly in the influence she exercised over him at this moment. The glory of renunciation—the crowning beauty of the age of chivalry—seemed to affect him as he stood there in the shimmering moonlight, a modern knight-errant vowing fealty to a high ideal at a mediæval shrine.

"I repeat," he said, "my promise to serve you as best I may."

"Then I implore you, Herr Bennett," went on the princess in a low voice, "to leave the

kingdom at once. The harm you have wrought may never be wholly undone, but you can, at least, save us from further disaster."

"It shall be as you wish, Princess Hilda," he said sadly. "But tell me, is the crisis more threatening than I had feared?"

"I do not know," she answered, a melancholy smile playing across her face. "The king is driven to his wit's ends, and to-night he had news from below that fills him with consternation. As you know, his brother, my uncle Wilhelm, plots for his dethronement. His emissaries throughout the kingdom are fostering discontent. The recent defalcations have emboldened the schemers and the feeling against the king is on the increase. There is only one thing that can save us, Herr Bennett. If it is noised abroad in the morning that you have left Hesse-Heilfels, never to return, his majesty's subjects will take heart and rally to his support. Am I not right?"

Her appeal to his judgment pleased Bennett. Furthermore, he knew that the conclusion she had reached was sound. Nevertheless, the sacrifice he was about to make was greater than she could understand. That a Yankee adventurer should dare to harbor for a princess of the house of Schwartzburg a feeling akin to love was a possibility that, he well knew, she could not comprehend.

"I fear," he said gloomily, "that you are not wrong, Princess Hilda, in looking upon me as the Jonah who is sinking the ship of state. It is well, perhaps, that I should go at once. But give me leave to say that in obeying your commands I feel a joy that is

begotten of my power to repair in part the wrongs that I have done to you, and a sorrow that springs from the thought that I shall never look upon your face again."

Impulsively he stepped forward, and bending his knee kissed the cold hand she held out to him. Then he arose, gazed for a moment at her white, sad face, and turned and left the hall.

How he reached his apartments, Bennett never knew. That he groped for many minutes in a darkness that seemed eternal, bruising himself in his efforts to find the moonlit corridor, he remembered later on; but the bitterness of his renunciation — fantastic though his love might be—was the one feeling that dominated him during that midnight passage through unknown hallways and up shadow-haunted stairs.

As he glanced around his bedchamber a conviction came over him that it had been entered since his departure. He had found the oak doors closed, as he had left them, but there was something in the appearance of the apartment—he could not say just what it was—that convinced him that some one had paid him a visit during his absence. He approached the bed and pulled aside the curtains. Upon one of the pillows a piece of note-paper had been pinned. Seizing it nervously, Bennett hurried to a window, through which the moonlight was still streaming. Scrawled in pencil, the paper bore the following lines:

"Come to the king at once when you return. He is in grave danger, and so are you. This is not a jest. COUSIN FRITZ."

CHAPTER V.

THE inn at which Jonathan Edwards Bennett, some weeks before the present crisis, had learned that King Rudolph XII. was afflicted with rheumatism, had become the centre of high pressure for politics and poker. "Destroy the inns and wine-shops in your domain, and you will never be bothered by conspiracies," a diplomatist and scholar had once written to a former king of Hesse-Heilfels. "I prefer my inns and my rebels to the loss of the former," the conservative Schwartzburger had answered. It is highly probable that the king in this instance displayed more wisdom than the diplomatist.

The ancient hostelry to which reference was made in a former chapter presented a picture of unwonted gayety on the moonlit night that had brought so many adventures to the distraught American at the castle. The wine that has made the Schwartzburger vineyards famous the world over has served to give to the inhabitants of Hesse-Heilfels a vivacity that is not generally characteristic of the German nation.

It is not too much to say, in illustration of the foregoing proposition, that King Rudolph's subjects were the only people in the empire who would have become fascinated by the game of draw poker at what might be termed "one fell swoop." Beneath their phlegmatic exterior, the inhabitants of Hesse-

Heilfels conceal temperaments highly impressionable and excitable.

"Give me one card, Heinrich," cried a short, fat, red-faced man, glancing slyly at the dealer and solemnly placing his discard on the table.

"Mein Gott, that looks as if he was drawing to a flush," exclaimed one of the opponents, throwing away his hand and gazing ruefully at his lost "ante."

Grouped around the four players in a rear room on the ground floor of the inn were ten or twelve men, varying in years from youth to old age. Their garb was picturesque and many-hued. Green or brown caps, velveteen coats, and low shoes combined to make their costumes pleasing to the eye of an observer sensitive to artistic effects. The eighteenth century in costume had met the nineteenth century at poker, and the outcome was a scene worthy the brush of a Dutch painter.

"Bring wine," cried one of the discouraged gamblers, who had lost steadily for an hour or more. "This is the devil's game! Here, you smug-faced Wilhelm! Repeat a paternoster over my chips. It will break the spell Satan has cast upon my luck."

"Heinrich wins again!" murmured the group of onlookers. "It is marvellous."

"Ach, Heinrich," exclaimed a large-eyed, tow-headed youth, "have you been taking private lessons at the castle?"

A general laugh followed this sally, and the game went on. Suddenly a rich voice arose from a corner of the room that lay concealed in shadow. "Hush, it is Carl! Let's hear his new song!" cried the group surrounding the gamblers. The four players

withdrew the chips they had placed in the centre of the table and suspended their game for a while. No sound interfered with the thrilling effect of the baritone's clear, full tones.

I.

A king in his castle was gay one day,
And he called for his poker chips,
And he cried: "Ach Gott, for a brave jack-pot,
With the red wine at my lips."

II.

And he played for stakes with a wight that night
Who came from the world below,
And the king at nine was touched by wine,
While the game was getting slow.

III.

"I'll bet my soul," cried the king, to bring
The fever he longed for back,
And a wicked smile he showed the while
As he shuffled the potent pack.

IV.

"Your soul I'll win, but not, by Gott,
On the turn of a fickle card!"
And the devil laughed, as the wine he quaffed,
And called the king his "pard."

V.

From nine to twelve, not long in song,
Was enough for the devil's game;
And the king was lost, as the cards he tossed
In the face of the imp to blame."

The applause that awarded the singer's effort was neither loud nor enthusiastic. This open commission of the crime of *lese majesté* in a public inn sent a thrill of astonishment through the crowd, and with one impulse the poker players threw down their cards and arose from the table.

"White livers!" cried the voice of the singer. "Are you afraid of shadows?" Carl, the famous baritone, stepped forward into

the centre of the room. He was not only the best singer and the most accomplished musician, but also the handsomest man in Hesse-Heilfels. "Gamblers, wine-bibbers, cowards! I blush for my country when I look at you!"

Carl Eingen was the only man in Hesse-Heilfels who would have dared to utter such words to these men, flushed as they were with wine. But his influence over them was strong, and they gazed upon his clear-cut, impassioned face with affection and admiration. He looked every inch a leader as he stood there bareheaded, his dark, curly hair adding to the beauty of his well-shaped head and pale, strong countenance.

"What have you done?" he went on sternly. "You have allowed a stranger from across the sea to become the head and front of this ancient realm. You sit here, playing the game he taught your king, while your country goes to ruin and the castle upon yonder hill becomes a plague-spot that throws a blight upon a whole people. Are you men —or simply wine-vats? Where is the manhood that made your ancestors great in war and men of force in peace? You have heard that in every inn, in every house in Hesse-Heilfels our countrymen, gone mad over a foolish game of chance, spend their days and nights playing poker. You have heard that chaos reigns at the castle, that the kingdom is placed in peril by a ruler who has become the tool of an adventurer, a man who has no claim upon the king, no right to our regard. Again I ask you, are you men? Think not that the people have no rights. The King of Hesse-Heilfels is absolute in power, but I

say to you, my friends, that he forfeits his divine right when he gives that power to a trickster, to a man of alien blood who loves us not. Do you weigh my words? Tell me, my countrymen, do I not speak the truth?"

"Ja wohl, Carl!" cried one of his hearers. "You are right. We will do as you direct, eh, my friends?"

A murmur of assent arose from the awed and penitent throng. One of the poker players seized the cards and chips that lay upon the table and hurled them passionately through the open window.

"Lead on, Carl," he cried. "We'll follow you to the death."

"Lead on, Carl. You'll find that we are men," shouted another.

"Down with the Yankee!" cried a third.

"Wilhelm for king!" came from the rear of the room.

"Ja! Ja! Wilhelm, Wilhelm!" arose the cry as the crowd poured from the hot and smoke-choked room into the cool, soft night outside, where the light of the gentle moon threw its silvery glory upon a scene well fitted to rouse in the hearts of men a love of fatherland.

Carl Eingen hurried to the front, and turning toward his overwrought followers, said sternly:

"No noise! Remain as silent as the night. We cannot overthrow a dynasty by childish chatter. The man who utters a sound is a traitor to Wilhelm, the rightful King of Hesse-Heilfels."

"Tell me, Carl, what is your plan?" asked one of the revolutionists, pushing his way through the throng to the leader's side.

"You can't depose a king with a few half-drunken men."

Carl Eingen gazed searchingly at the pale, drawn face of the speaker.

"Have no fear, Conrad," he said, convinced that he addressed a man not stirred by the fumes of wine. '" The guards at the palace are on our side. From every part of the kingdom our friends are hurrying toward the castle. This is no midsummer night's madness, Conrad. It is simply a very small part of a deep-laid scheme, conducted possibly from Berlin and approved by one who is greater than the king of Hesse-Heilfels. These men with us I shall use for a special purpose. The brunt of this business is borne by others, but to me has been entrusted the capture of Herr Bennett, the Yankee. I saw that I could carry my point with our friends here if I said the right word at the right time. Their enthusiasm, however, is spasmodic, and their lukewarmness, their dread of the awful punishment that might come to them, will return to them anon. But there is inspiration in sharp work. We must give them no time to think, Conrad! Just whisper to Heinrich that it is our purpose to capture the Yankee in his bed. It will revive their waning spirits and act like wine upon their blood."

A hoarse murmur of approval again arose from the hurrying throng as they learned the special object of their expedition. Then in absolute silence they stole beneath the trees of the park toward the castle.

"There," said Carl Eingen, taking Conrad by the arm and pointing to a balcony that jutted out from one of the corner towers of

of the castle, "there is where the Yankee sleeps."

"I think I see some one moving up there," whispered Conrad excitedly. On the instant the figure of the dwarf, an uncanny shape seemingly begotten of the madness of their rebellious dreams, appeared upon the stone coping of the balcony.

"It's Cousin Fritz," exclaimed Conrad hoarsely. "Is he in your secret? See how he waves his cap."

"Back, men!" cried Carl excitedly. "Get into the shadow of the trees. No, Conrad, that madcap dwarf is loyal to Rudolph, but he knows our plans. In trying to win his support I fear we have allowed him to learn too much of our design. He may be crazy, but he's very clever. Confouud such blundering! We should have captured Cousin Frtiz and locked him up to-day. He knows every nook and corner of the castle, and is an ally worth a thousand men with guns. But come, let us move! We'll find friends and counsellors across the park. Silence, there! Forward, men, and make no noise—on the peril of your lives."

CHAPTER VI.

JONATHAN EDWARDS BENNETT found himself in an uncomfortable predicament. He had solemnly promised to leave the kingdom at once, and he felt that the pledge he had given to the Princess Hilda implied an obligation upon his part to refrain from seeing Rudolph XII. again. On the other hand, he had no desire to risk his life in an effort to escape. That he was surrounded by enemies he could not doubt. He recalled the silhouette made by the conspirators against the moonlight, and it assumed a new significance to his mind as a black menace. To leave the castle at this moment would be to face mysterious perils that he had no wish to confront.

If he obeyed the command in the jester's note he saw before him two unpleasant possibilities. If Cousin Fritz played him false, he might walk straight into the enemy's trap. If, on the other hand, the king really awaited his coming, his recognition of the summons might look to Princess Hilda like treachery to her and disloyalty to his pledged word.

Bennett musingly approached a window and looked forth upon a scene that would have thrilled him, at a happier moment, with its calm beauty. The moon, now high in the heavens, smiled benignly upon a sleeping world. A gentle breeze whispered

midnight gossip to the nodding tree-tops. Man and his restless passions seemed out of place in such surroundings. But suddenly upon Bennett's astonished sight broke a vision that drove from his mind all idea of nature's benignity and concentrated his thought upon the diabolical activity of man.

As if by magic, the castle seemed to be surrounded by dark forms moving hither and thither with a certain military precision. They appeared to come from the forest and to obey the will of some leader who had carefully matured his plans. Bennett opened the casement and leaned forward. He could hear the distant words of command and the subdued tramp of marching men. That he was wide awake he knew, but the inexplicable scene before him caused him for an instant to question his own sanity.

"Ha, you doubt my word?" whispered a rasping voice at the American's elbow. "You imperil precious lives because, forsooth, you will not look upon the jester as a friend. Herr Bennett, let me tell you you are madder than your servant, Cousin Fritz."

The dwarf chuckled with raucous merriment at his grim joke. Then he seized Bennett's arm and drew him away from the window.

"There is no time to lose," whispered the dwarf excitedly. "The king will not listen to reason. He refuses to admit that his crown, his castle, his very life are in peril at this hour. Come with me and tell him what you saw from yonder window. Then throw him a hand at poker for life or death, eh? We must be gay, Herr Bennett, even though Brother Wilhelm has placed his hand upon

our sceptre and would hurl us from the throne. We must be gay, nicht wahr?"

In another moment Bennett and his madcap guide were hastening toward King Rudolph's audience chamber.

"The Princess Hilda, and two or three of the king's most loyal gentlemen you will find here," said the dwarf, as they approached the king's apartments. "I want you to persuade my Cousin Rudolph that he is backing a bobtailed flush against a full house. Isn't that correct, Herr Bennett? A bobtailed flush against a full house?"

"But what is your plan," asked Bennett feverishly. "Is this really an armed effort to dethrone the king?"

"It is indeed—an effort armed to the teeth. You and I, Herr Bennett, are the only loyal subjects left at this moment to Rudolph XII., one hour ago king of Hesse-Heilfels. I have been looking for an outbreak for some years back. I am used to them, Herr Bennett. During the thousand years I have passed as the real ruler of Hesse-Heilfels, I have seen many uprisings of the people, and I have learned to detect the preliminary symptoms. Wilhelm has played his cards well. He has waited until the time was ripe. Now he 'calls,' and Rudolph holds no hand."

"And you, Cousin Fritz?" asked Bennett, marvelling at the strange creature at his side.

"And I? I remain true to Rudolph. I can afford to, Herr Bennett. Am I not, after all, the eternal king of Hesse-Heilfels? I was king before the Schwartzburgers came, and I shall reign when they are gone. I lose nothing by clinging to Rudolph's falling

state. And he has always been kind to Cousin Fritz! But let us hurry on, Herr Bennett. Every moment is now of value, if we would persuade the king that he must take to flight."

Bennett stumbled forward through the dark corridor, clinging to the dwarf's arm and wondering vaguely if the night's adventures would never come to an end. It seemed to the American as if he had crowded into the space of a few brief hours an experience stolen in some mysterious way from a year in the life of a mediæval knight-errant. "We live by thoughts, not years; by heart-throbs, not in figures on a dial," he murmured to himself as they reached the outer doors of the king's audience chamber.

A striking tableau met their eyes as they passed from the gloom of the corridor into the lighted hall. King Rudolph, pale, dishevelled, wild-eyed, stood in the centre of the chamber, gazing helplessly at the two courtiers who had remained loyal to him on this night of Brother Wilhelm's triumph. The Princess Hilda, her face white, but calm, stood by his side and seemed to be whispering words of comfort to the discomfited monarch.

As Rudolph's eyes rested upon Bennett an expression of hope crossed his face.

"Is it true, Herr Bennett?" he cried. "Tell these men they lie. Tell them my castle is not infested by my brother's friends! Tell them they dream wild dreams on a peaceful summer night. What means this wild scurrying to and fro? Speak, Herr Bennett. You, at least have not lost your wits."

The American strove to catch Hilda's

eye, but the princess studiously avoided his gaze.

"Your majesty," said Bennett solemnly, "I have seen from my windows a sight that convinces me you stand in great peril. I cannot doubt the evidence of my senses. This may be the end of the nineteenth century, but there appears to be a middle-age deviltry going on to-night, and you and I—if you will pardon my frankness—seem to be the victims."

"You blunder there, Herr Bennett," said the king, with a touch of dignity that was worthy of his royal pretensions. "You are the cause—I am the victim."

Cousin Fritz had been dancing impatiently round the room.

"You waste time, Cousin Rudolph," he cried recklessly. "You can't stand here and put down a revolution by a royal edict. You don't hold a card in your hand that is worth drawing to. Leave the table and the stakes to the winners and wait for better luck."

King Rudolph, with a gesture of despair, turned toward the dwarf.

"Treachery from friends and wisdom from the mouths of fools! It's all of a piece! Go on, Cousin Fritz! What do you suggest? Your advice is as valuable to-night as that of the men who have pushed me toward this precipice." The king glanced pointedly at Bennett and the two loyal courtiers who lurked in the background.

"Your only chance, Cousin Rudolph," said the dwarf coolly, stepping forward and bending his knee with solemn mockery before the king, "is to follow my guidance. Your guards have proved false, and within another

ten minutes the hirelings of Wilhelm will be at yonder door. What will happen then, who can say? A brother who would seize your crown will not hesitate to take your life. But his lawlessness will not find favor long with the good people of Hesse-Heilfels. To-night they follow the lead of evil counsellors. To-morrow they will see the horror of their deeds. To-morrow, Cousin Rudolph, you will again be king in their hearts. To-night they serve your rival's schemes."

"But this is hardly to the point, Cousin Fritz," said the king gently. "You may speak the truth, but to-morrow has not come. We must act, and act at once."

"Follow me, then," cried the dwarf, springing to his feet and seizing the hand of Princess Hilda. "Hark! Hear that? They are coming toward us. Quick now! There is no time to lose."

Drawing the princess with him, Cousin Fritz disappeared behind a heavy curtain that concealed a portrait of a famous Schwartzburger, who had held the throne of Hesse-Heilfels nearly two centuries ago. When King Rudolph, Bennett, and the two courtiers drew the curtain aside, the portrait had disappeared and a black hole in the wall met their eyes. Out of the darkness came the voice of Cousin Fritz.

"Come on! Come on! Don't stop to draw cards. This isn't poker. Do you hear me? We aren't playing jack-pots, your majesty. We're making history."

In another instant the curtain had fallen into place and the audience chamber remained lonely and silent in the half lights. Suddenly an uproar outside the heavy doors

arose and into the room rushed a crowd of white-faced, eager men.

"Gott im Himmel! where is he?" cried a hoarse voice. And behind the curtain the Schwartzburger of other days smiled in the darkness—and remained silent.

CHAPTER VII.

COUSIN FRITZ led the way through the impenetrable darkness, holding the princess by the arm. Behind them came Bennett, guiding the king by the sound of the dwarf's harsh, insistent voice. Count von Reibach and Baron Wollenstein, the loyal courtiers, stumbled along in the rear, muttering impatiently now and again as they collided with some obstacle in their course or lost sight in the gloom of the fugitives in front of them.

"Courage, friends," cried Cousin Fritz, cheerfully, "we'll find a place of safety and comfort very soon." He and the princess had paused to await the approach of their companions.

"We go down these stairs," explained their guide, as the four men grouped themselves behind him. Scratching a match against the stone wall at his right hand, Cousin Fritz showed them a flight of steps that seemed to run downward into the blackness of everlasting gloom. The Princess Hilda trembled as if with cold.

"We didn't come here for burial, Cousin Fritz," remarked King Rudolph testily, leaning forward and gazing into the abyss.

"No, your majesty, you came here to escape it," returned the dwarf sarcastically. He struck another temporary light, and taking the hand of the princess began to descend the steps. It required a good deal of cour-

age to follow this madcap guide into the bowels of the earth, but the men behind him seemed to have no choice in the matter. For some time past they had obeyed his orders, and at this juncture there seemed to be no good reason for rejecting his leadership. Bennett was the only one of the party who harbored the slightest distrust of the dwarf's loyalty. Circumstances had combined to prove to him that Cousin Fritz was worthy of the trust reposed in him, but the American, suspicious by temperament and habit, crept down the stone steps into the chill blackness with great reluctance. He had grown very weary of the seemingly inexhaustible resources of the old castle in the way of unpleasant surprises, and he hesitated to place himself beyond all possibility of escape from the antique structure.

There was one circumstance, however, that gave Bennett unalloyed satisfaction in this hour of peril and discomfort. The social barrier between the Princess Hilda and himself had been broken down at one blow. They were both fugitives, and, although she might hold him responsible for the downfall of King Rudolph, he was, nevertheless, in a position to be of great service to her in the crises that were sure to confront them in the near future. As he caught a glimpse of her stately figure in the flickering gleam thrown by a match lighted by the dwarf, as they reached the bottom of the long stairway, a sensation of ecstatic triumph thrilled Bennett's soul. Down here in the damp depths of this gigantic cellar there were no kings, no princesses, no counts, no barons. They were all adventurers. The equality begotten

of misfortune had placed the American upon a new plane, and he rejoiced at the prospect that opened before his mind's eye. It would go hard, indeed, if he could not prove his fealty to the princess by a method less heroic, perhaps, but more satisfactory than that of voluntary banishment. Nevertheless, he realized that at this moment the princess looked upon him as a perjured and recreant knight, no longer worthy of rank on the lists of chivalry.

"What next, Cousin Fritz?" asked King Rudolph, puffing heavily and peering anxiously around him. "We seem to be in the wine cellar."

"We are, your majesty," answered the dwarf. "We are surrounded by vintages worth a king's ransom. Pardon me, your majesty. I didn't mean to be personal. But, follow me a little further, and I will fulfil my promise regarding your safety and comfort."

A moment later the fugitives stood in a large, damp room, in which Cousin Fritz seemed thoroughly at home. He scurried about, lighting candles, pushing pieces of antique furniture toward his guests and keeping up a running fire of comment on the honor paid him by a visit from royalty. Now and then he would drop a sarcastic remark that suggested to Bennett the line of thought the dwarf's mind was pursuing. Cousin Fritz, monarch of Hesse-Heilfels for a thousand years, was proving openly at last that he was more powerful than any temporary monarch who held the throne in the eyes of a short-sighted world. Here in his secret apartments was the real centre of royalty in Hesse-Heilfels. Could he not afford

to let the petty kings up above fret their lives away while he, to whom a century was but a single day, reigned undisturbed, but all-powerful, over the realm they thought was theirs?

"Your majesty needs repose," said Cousin Fritz imperiously, pointing toward an ancient divan in a distant corner of the room. "You are out of spirits, out of breath, and out of danger. Lie down and take your rest. We have much to do later on, and we must begin the day fresh from a little sleep."

King Rudolph gazed blankly at the dwarf. The deposed monarch seemed to feel the severe physical exertion he had undergone, and his breath came and went with painful effort. He stumbled toward the divan and stretched himself thereon with a groan. The princess stood by the side of his rude couch and gently rubbed the brow from which a crown had so recently fallen. In a moment the king had dropped into a restless sleep and was snoring with a royal indifference to the comfort of others curiously characteristic of the Schwartzburgers.

Cousin Fritz deferentially approached the Princess Hilda, and, taking her hand, led her to a corner of the room that lay deep in shadow. Pulling aside a heavy, moth-eaten curtain, the dwarf pointed to an inner and smaller room and said:

"Your apartment awaits you, princess. In the hurry of our departure I forgot to summon one of your women to attend you. I will repair this oversight at once, however. I hope you will forgive my carelessness."

A sad smile played across the wan face of the princess.

"I need no assistance, Cousin Fritz," she said gently. "Do not risk your life for my sake. You must not return to my apartments."

The dwarf laughed gayly. "I go and come as the humor sways me," he said proudly, "and no man says me nay. Sleep for a time, sweet princess, and when you awake you will find a woman by your side. Aufwiedersehen, and may you sleep well."

He dropped the curtain and skipped lightly toward von Reibach and Wollenstein, who stood in deep converse in one corner of the room, glancing furtively now and then at Bennett, who was seated in a chair near the centre of the apartment, moodily reviewing the startling events of the long night.

"You will do me the honor, gentlemen," said the dwarf cordially, but with a note of command in his voice, "you will do me the honor of making yourselves comfortable for a time. You will find these old couches fitted for an early morning nap. As for me, I must return to the upper halls."

Bennett overheard the dwarf's final words. They reawakened his slumbering suspicion. As the count and baron, acting upon the hint thrown out to them by their host, prepared themselves for sleep in a shadow-haunted alcove, he strode up to Cousin Fritz. Placing his hand upon the dwarf's shoulder, he said:

"You are about to return to the upper part of the castle. I go with you, my friend."

A mocking smile played across the unsymmetrical face of the dwarf. He read Bennett's mind at a glance.

"As you will, Herr Bennett. My advice to you would be to get a little sleep while

you may, but your company on an expedition that is not without some slight peril would be a pleasure and a comfort to me. Come, then, there is no time to lose."

They had hardly passed from the room into the gloom of the cellar when a thought crossed Bennett's mind that caused him to seize the dwarf's arm and hold him motionless for a moment.

"These men," he whispered, "why have they remained loyal to the king? Count von Reibach first. Why does he cling to Rudolph's fallen fortunes?"

Cousin Fritz chuckled silently. Then he answered in low, rasping tones:

"Von Reibach is a ruined man. He has lost his all at poker, and fears to face his creditors."

"And Baron Wollenstein?"

"Oh, Wollenstein," answered the dwarf, "Wollenstein is in love with the Princess Hilda."

"The devil you say!" muttered Bennett profanely. Suddenly he seized the dwarf's hand in a grip of iron.

"Tell me, man, why do you leave us here at this time?"

Cousin Fritz uttered an exclamation of anger, and attempted to withdraw his hand from the American's grip.

"Gott im Himmel, Herr Bennett, why do you distrust me?" he asked petulantly. "You're the shortest-sighted clever man I ever knew. I'm about to run some risk, if you must know it, in order to bring back a waiting-woman for the princess. I made a miscalculation, and must atone for it. Are you satisfied?"

A hot flush rose to Bennett's cheeks, who felt ashamed of the injustice he had done to the loyal little man at his side.

"Go then," he exclaimed cordially, "and forgive me, Cousin Fritz, for my impertinence. Hereafter I shall trust you fully. As for me, I think it best that I should return to your rooms. Do you understand me?"

"I think I do, Herr Bennett," answered the dwarf, laughing mockingly as he disappeared in the darkness.

The American turned and groped his way toward the room he had just left. He opened the heavy door softly. The candles in the grim apartment were still lighted, but heavy shadows danced blackly here and there as the flames wavered in the draught. Bennett glanced around the apartment apprehensively. Suddenly from a distant corner two figures made toward him hurriedly. He realized instinctively that the count and baron had been plotting his destruction.

Closing the door behind him he leaned against it, and drawing his revolver from his hip pocket held the weapon in front of him. The flickering candle-light was reflected by the gleaming steel.

"Hold hard, my friends," said Bennett coolly, "a step farther in my direction means a bullet for the man who makes it."

CHAPTER VIII.

BENNETT'S face was pale but smiling as he witnessed the dismay of his baffled foes. That his possession of a pistol at this crisis had saved his life he had not the slightest doubt. The count hated him because he had introduced poker into the kingdom; the baron, with the jealous eyes of a lover, saw in the American a possible rival for the favor of the princess. Furthermore, the courtiers realized, doubtless, that if they were captured in the company of the American their chance of winning pardon from Wilhelm, the successful usurper, would be slight.

All this passed through Bennett's mind as he leaned against the great door and pointed his weapon first at the count and then at the baron, taking a mischievous pleasure in their not unnatural disquietude. Hardly a sound broke the stillness. A rat gnawed noisily somewhere in the woodwork. The asthmatic breathing of the deposed king could be heard, irregular and ominous.

Suddenly a swishing of skirts startled Bennett and his foiled assailants, and the Princess Hilda, white and anxious, stood between them. The American returned his revolver to his pocket and folded his arms silently.

"What does this mean?" asked the Princess sternly, turning from one to another of the trio. "Is it not enough that we are driven like rats into a hole? Why should

you quarrel? Herr Bennett, why have you threatened the lives of these men? Are they not unarmed? And you stand there, like a highwayman, pointing a pistol at their heads. Speak, sir! Have you nothing to say?"

Bennett's face, flushed at first, had grown white and drawn.

"I have nothing to say, your royal highness," he answered in a low voice.

Count von Reibach and Baron Wollenstein gazed at the American in amazement. His generosity was inexplicable.

The Princess Hilda stood silent for a time, plunged in deep thought. Then she said firmly:

"Give me your revolver, Herr Bennett."

He removed the weapon from his pocket and placed it carefully in her outstretched hand.

"A wasp is harmless without his sting," muttered the baron under his breath. Count von Reibach, more generous than his colleague, placed his hand upon the latter's mouth and whispered to him to remain silent.

The Princess Hilda had retreated toward her apartment. Before she dropped the curtain she turned and looked at the little group behind her. In one hand she held the pistol, while with the other she drew the curtains aside. The picture that she made at that moment in the flickering light, with the fitful gleams playing on her golden hair, while heavy shadows behind her threw the outlines of her tall figure into strong relief, Bennett never forgot. Suddenly she dropped the curtain and disappeared. The deep gloom of the apartment seemed to return on the

instant, and the American turned sadly toward his foes. Deprived of weapon, he had determined to sell his life, if the struggle were forced upon him, as dearly as he might. To his astonishment, however, he saw Count von Reibach approaching him with an outstretched hand.

"You are a gentleman, Herr Bennett," said the count cordially, "in spite of the fact that you go to extremes."

"*Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes*," muttered Bennett coldly, not accepting the count's hand. "You must acknowledge, sir, that by going to extremes I took the only course open to me at the moment."

Count von Reibach smiled grimly. "The fact is, Herr Bennett, that we had formed no diabolical design, the baron and myself. For certain reasons—reasons of state, as our unhappy king would say—we felt that your presence here was inopportune, and we had decided to—to——"

"Assassinate me," remarked Bennett curtly.

"Not at all. You do us grave injustice, I assure you. It is just possible that, had you not checked our impetuosity at the right moment, we might have imprisoned you in an empty wine-cask somewhere in the cellar, but we had no wish to take your life. The Count von Reibach and Baron Wollenstein are not cut-throats, Herr Bennett. And let me assure you we appreciate your generosity in refusing to accuse us to the princess."

The Baron Wollenstein had listened sullenly to his comrade's rather lame apology. He gazed with stubborn enmity at Bennett, and then said to the count:

"Come, von Reibach, let's get some sleep.

The fact is, I'm *ausgespielt.* As for this—gentleman, let me assure him that we have no further intention of interfering with his liberty. Come, count."

The two courtiers retired toward a dark corner of the room, not far from the entrance to Princess Hilda's apartment. Here they stretched themselves upon a dilapidated piece of furniture that had once served as a regal couch for a reigning Schwartzburger. Bennett could hear their guttural voices as they talked together in low tones for a time. Then silence, broken only by the king's labored breathing and the occasional snores of the exhausted courtiers, reigned in the old lumber-room, made barely habitable by Cousin Fritz's efforts.

The Princess Hilda, upon her return to the inner room, had thrown herself fully dressed upon the improvised bed prepared for her by the dwarf, and had vainly attempted to forget her woes in sleep. The horrors of her situation forced themselves persistently upon her mind and the events of a long and dreadful day allied themselves in opposition to peaceful slumber. It seemed an age since she had stood beside King Rudolph in the morning and had attempted to impress him with the seriousness of the crisis that confronted them. The downfall of her uncle, and their undignified flight, had occurred with such suddenness that she had not yet been able to grasp their full significance. Then a strange, inexplicable feeling stole over her and she realized, with a sensation of shame, that in this dark hour she took comfort in the presence of Herr Bennett. Annoyed by this discovery, she turned rest-

lessly upon her pillow and again attempted to forget her woes and weariness in sleep.

The lower regions of the castle of the Schwartzburgers were not wholly under the control of Cousin Fritz. His sway was disputed by the rats, liberty-loving creatures having no respect for the rights of property nor reverence for royalty. A rat-hole, running clear through the wall, opened like a speaking-tube just where the shapely ear of the Princess Hilda rested as she lay quiet, fervently praying for sleep. Suddenly her wandering thoughts were recalled from the borderland of oblivion by the stern realities of her surroundings. She heard distinctly the guttural voice of Baron Wollenstein as he said to Count von Reibach:

"You are too soft-hearted, Count. Our only safety lies in Herr Bennett's death. Mark my words, it is his life or ours in the end. This is no time for gentle deeds and kindly words. We'll be captured in this hole, as sure as Wilhelm reigns. If we kill Bennett and conceal his body, we can prove to Wilhelm that we followed Rudolph in the interest of the new *régime*. Verstehen Sie? Am I not right?"

The horrified princess could not catch the count's answer. She strained her ear in vain, but the rat-hole no longer served her purpose as an eavesdropper. How long she lay motionless she knew not, but after a time the snoring of the conspirators convinced her that they had ceased their plotting for a time and were plunged in sleep.

The princess arose softly, grasped the revolver that she had placed on the floor near her bed, and stole toward the entrance to the

chamber. As she pulled aside the curtains and glanced furtively around the larger room she saw that one candle still burned dimly in a corner near the main entrance. By its flickering gleams she could make out the figure of the exhausted American as he lay, sprawled in broken slumbers, in an antique chair near the door through which he expected the return of Cousin Fritz.

As she approached Bennett a feeling of mingled tenderness and repentance came over her This man had been in peril of his life, and she had harshly accused him of a crime. Was it not more than possible that she had always misjudged him; that he had found it impracticable to fulfil the oath he had sworn to her in the Hall of Armor? Surely he had not promised to leave the castle before the morning, and the morning, she imagined, was only just breaking. She glanced down at his white, clear-cut face, rendered almost ghastly by the dim light in contrast with his black, luxuriant hair.

"Herr Bennett," she whispered gently, bending forward and placing a hand upon his shoulder. He awoke on the instant and their eyes met.

"Take your pistol," she said simply. "You are still in grave danger. I did you an injustice."

He had sprung to his feet, a mournful smile playing across his face.

"Your royal highness," he said, "I thank you from my heart—not for the weapon but for your words."

A flush arose to her cheeks and there came into her eyes a light as sweet as the dawn that drove the shadows from the hills outside.

CHAPTER IX.

THE Princess Hilda opened her eyes wearily. She had slept for several hours, but her first sensation as she woke was one of utter misery. Sleep had brought with it no refreshment, no exhilaration. The mere joy of living, that so often thrilled her in the morning, she seemed to have lost forever. The twilight that reigned in this subterranean apartment, the sudden recollection of the grim disasters of the previous day, the discomfort that resulted from sleeping fully dressed, and the sensation of utter loneliness that came over her, combined to render her awakening painful. She turned impatiently upon her couch. Suddenly a smile of joy lighted her sad face. Fraulein Müller, her favorite attendant, a plump, red-cheeked young woman of twenty, was seated by her side.

"Good morning, your highness," cried the maiden cheerily. "You seem glad to see me."

"I am indeed," said the princess warmly. "This has been, Gretchen, oh, such an awful night! I feel as if, somehow, my youth had gone forever; that I shall always be an old, old woman."

Fraulein Müller laughed gayly. "It is not so bad as that, my princess. Lie quiet for a while and I will make you young again. See, I have brought with me many things

that you need. I was heart-broken until Cousin Fritz, who can crawl through cracks in the floor or fly through the ceiling, stood suddenly by my side and told me to dry my tears and make ready to attend you. There were wild doings in the castle last night, and I sat with the other women in your apartments trembling at the awful sounds we heard. When Cousin Fritz appeared and told us that you were safe, we took him in our arms and kissed him until he kicked and swore and called us hard names. Then we dropped the wicked little angel and I got a few of your things into a bundle and followed him into the bowels of the earth. It wasn't much fun, your highness, to creep through the darkness with that crazy little villain at my side, laughing wildly at my fears and pinching me now and then to hear me cry out with fright. But when I saw you lying here alone, I felt that I could hug Cousin Fritz. His head is queer enough, but he has a heart of gold."

As she thus talked on, while she loosened the Princess Hilda's hair and brushed out the golden-brown locks, the feeling of despair that had come over the royal fugitive departed. The princess was by temperament a sanguine, sunny-natured girl, cold and haughty toward those she could not trust, but cordially affectionate with her intimates. Her attendants had been recruited from the best families in the kingdom, and it was known throughout Hesse-Heilfels that the Princess Hilda, in spite of her proud bearing, was a very lovable creature.

"Tell me, Gretchen," she said, glancing anxiously at Fraulein Müller, who was at that

moment spreading a morning dress upon the bed, "tell me what has happened up above? Are the people—my people, as I loved to call them—really thirsting for my blood?"

Fraulein Müller laughed aloud. She was one of those rare creatures whose gayety cannot be suppressed by the most dismal surroundings.

"It was rumored when I came away, your royal highness, that your Uncle Wilhelm was bitterly disappointed at your disappearance. He is, it is said, anxious to get word to you that his plans did not include any change in your status at court. He has spread abroad the impression that he has deposed King Rudolph simply to save Hesse-Heilfels from ruin. He has no intention, it is reported, of altering your position in the kingdom. Somebody told me that he had made the remark that your uncle would still be king, but sane instead of mad."

"Hush, Fraulein Müller," said the princess sternly. "These walls are not to be trusted —as I well know—and I would not have King Rudolph hear what you have just said for worlds. How little Uncle Wilhelm knows my heart! King Rudolph has been to me a father since my childhood. Sane or mad, king or exile, he deserves my loyalty and love. Listen, Gretchen! I would die with Rudolph in this rat-hole sooner than return to Wilhelm's court and countenance his treachery by silent acquiescence. I have striven to prevent this awful crisis. I have labored to turn my Uncle Rudolph from his mad ways. I have failed. But let it not be said that the Princess Hilda of Hesse-Heilfels changes her colors with the fortunes of her

house. If loyalty to Rudolph means imprisonment, or even death, I shall follow his banner to the end."

She stood there, flushed, defiant, beautiful, her eyes dark with the fervor of her passion; a girl no longer, for the stern discipline of evil fortune had made her a woman in a night. Never again would her heart dance merrily with the mere gayety of youth. She had lost something of the precious vivacity of girlhood, but in its place had come the strength and firmness that add a touch of grandeur to maturity.

Fraülein Müller gazed at her mistress with admiration. Never before had the maiden she had served seemed so thoroughly a queen as at this moment when she stood, a fugitive skulking in a cellar, bereft of everything that makes royalty impressive, and voiced to a single listener the noblest sentiments of loyalty. Above her shone the bright light of the summer sun, awakening a people who would gladly welcome her return to the pomp and state that had been hers throughout her life. Above her reigned a king who would place her by his side and reward her allegiance to his cause with power and dominion. In contrast with all this, what was offered her? An existence of wretched discomfort in the damp darkness of a rat-haunted chamber. A miserable present and an uncertain future. The companionship of ruined men, of a king whose crazy folly had hurled him from the pinnacle of power into the abysmal depths of despair and ruin. Here was a girl of eighteen, upon whom nature had lavished all her gifts, and to whom the world bowed down in loving homage, confronted by a

choice from which the boldest man would have shrunk back in dismay. And the Princess Hilda gave up the sunshine for the darkness, the light of day for the gloom of night, the pleasures of the gladsome world for the grim shadows of a living tomb! Is it strange that in Hesse-Heilfels you should hear it said that in the Schwartzburger blood there is a strain of heroism that breaks out now and then, as the generations come and go?

Something of all this passed through Fraulein Müller's mind as she gazed at the princess with eyes that looked upon her royal mistress with new reverence. She bent forward and kissed Hilda's hand with loving deference. There were tears on the Fraulein's cheeks as she smiled up at her mistress, from whose face the flush of excitement had departed.

"Ah, Gretchen," said the princess wearily, "you must not weep! Surely, nothing can be gained by tears. But to be a woman is so hard! How powerless we are! Oh, for a man's arm to-day, Gretchen! Were I a prince, do you know what I would do? If they had driven me down into this hole, I would find the powder magazine and blow those rebels into bits."

Fraulein Müller laughed merrily. The ludicrous side of a situation always appealed first to her mind.

"Would it not be a grim revenge?" she cried. "But I fear, your highness, we would not live to enjoy it."

At that moment a knock at the door recalled them to the exigencies of the hour. Fraulein Müller ran merrily toward the entrance.

That she and her mistress were not wholly alone was a reassuring thought.

"Who's there?" she cried, smoothing back her hair from her brow and rearranging her skirts. The habits of a court are not quickly lost, even in a cellar.

"Cousin Fritz, my Lady Müller. An envoy from the reigning King of Hesse-Heilfels, Rudolph XII. I crave audience of the Princess Hilda."

Fraulein Müller, smiling at the madcap's pompous words, threw back the door. The dwarf instantly rushed in, turned quickly and pinched her arm with mischievous force, and then hurried forward, to throw himself upon one knee before the princess, the feather of his jaunty cap trailing on the floor.

"Your royal highness," said he ceremoniously, his harsh voice penetrating to the furthest corners of the room, "Your liege lord, the King of Hesse-Heilfels, commends himself to you with loving words and commands your immediate presence in the dining-hall. Such is the message he ordered me to give you. Personally let me add, your royal highness, that this morning we draw to a full larder, and, if your appetite is good, I should advise you to take a hand in the game."

The Princess Hilda could not restrain a smile at the dwarf's words, but she felt a pang of annoyance at hearing again the poker jargon that had become synonymous, to her mind, with ruin and disgrace.

"Tell the king, Cousin Fritz," she said, rising and moving toward the door, "that I will be with him at once."

CHAPTER X.

WILHELM IX., King of Hesse-Heilfels by the divine right of grand larceny, gazed from a window in the castle at the rising sun; emblematic, as he reflected, of himself and his fortunes. He was a younger, better built man than his brother, Rudolph the Deposed. His legs were much longer than his brother's, thus making his head cooler. There was an old saying in Hesse-Heilfels to the effect that "a Schwartzburger with short legs always toddles into trouble." His superiority in length of limb had had much to do toward rendering Wilhelm's usurpation successful. The impressionable and somewhat superstitious people of Hesse-Heilfels possessed an hereditary conviction that the longer the legs of a Schwartzburger the better fitted he was to rule the kingdom. When, therefore, it was whispered that Wilhelm plotted to seize the sceptre the Heilfelsans were drawn irresistibly to his cause. They preferred a long-legged Schwartzburger, of good habits, as king, to a short-legged gambler who was over-fond of wine.

Wilhelm's face, pale and drawn from the stress of an exciting night, wore a smile of triumph as he looked forth upon the picturesque domain that he had so easily made his own. Backed by the people of Hesse-Heilfels, and sure of recognition at Berlin, he

felt that he was safely seated upon a throne that he had long wished to occupy. Presently he turned from the window, and beckoned to a man who had recently entered the room and stood awaiting the pleasure of royalty.

"What news, Herr Schmidt?" asked Wilhelm eagerly, "is there any clew to my lost relatives? My brother can't perform miracles. He must be concealed somewhere in the castle."

"We have searched the building from top to bottom, your majesty, but can find no trace of Rudolph, the Princess, nor the Yankee. But a strange story has come from the Princess Hilda's waiting-women. How much truth there is in it, I do not know."

"We'll find out at first hand," said King Wilhelm, seating himself in a chair by the side of a small round table. "Summon all her women to my presence."

Herr Schmidt hurried from the room.

"Carl Eingen, a word with you," said Wilhelm, and the handsome baritone approached the king and deferentially bent the knee.

"As I understand it," said Wilhelm, "the capture of this American adventurer was left to you, Carl Eingen. Why did you fail to obey orders?"

The tall youth turned pale, but answered firmly:

"The failure cannot be laid at my door, your majesty. I obeyed in detail the instructions I received. The weak spot in our scheme lay in the fact that we put too little stress upon the cleverness of Cousin Fritz."

"Cousin Fritz?" cried the king in astonishment. "The madcap dwarf? Surely he

could not have foiled you all! What had he to do with the affair?"

"An hour or so before we made the general advance upon the castle, your majesty, Cousin Fritz was seen—I saw him myself—dancing wildly on the balcony in front of the American's apartment. The dwarf is the only man in the kingdom who knows all the underground secrets of this ancient castle. I have no doubt that he has led Rudolph and the rest to a place of, at least, temporary secrecy."

"Just who are missing, Herr Eingen?" asked Wilhelm.

"Rudolph, the Princess Hilda, Baron Wollenstein, Count von Reibach, Herr Bennett, and Cousin Fritz."

"That is all?"

"So far as I can learn, no one else has disappeared from the castle since our entrance."

"It is strange," mused the usurper. "So large a party, it seems to me, could not vanish in one instant without leaving some clew behind them. You say, Herr Eingen, that the cellars have been thoroughly explored?"

"Yes, your majesty. I led the exploring party myself. There is, beneath this castle, a labyrinth of passages, cellars, dungeons, and lumber rooms that taxed our patience severely, but we groped into every nook and corner, and found nothing to reward our search."

At this moment Herr Schmidt returned, followed by a group of young women whom the events of the night had rendered hysterical. At a sign from Wilhelm, Herr Schmidt led his bevy of distraught maidens toward the usurper.

"Now understand me," said Wilhelm stern-

ly, "I shall imprison you in a body if you all insist upon talking at once. Furthermore, I object to tears. You have nothing to cry about if you will obey your king. Do you comprehend me? Your king, Wilhelm IX., by the grace of God monarch of Hesse-Heilfels. You there, in front, answer my questions! What is this wonderful tale that I hear has been spread abroad from your corner of the castle?"

Carl Eingen, his countenance disturbed, was anxiously glancing from face to face of the trembling women, seeking some one he could not find. In answer to Wilhelm, a maiden standing nearer to royalty than the others said, her voice tremulous with emotion:

"This morning, your majesty, about four o'clock, Cousin Fritz suddenly appeared, as if by magic, among us. He ordered us to make a bundle of things most necessary for the Princess Hilda's comfort. Then he went away, accompanied by her royal highness' favorite attendant."

Carl Eingen gazed at the speaker earnestly, while Wilhelm said:

"Her favorite attendant? Who may that be?"

"The Fraulein Müller, your majesty."

Carl Eingen's face turned white. He had long loved Fraulein Müller, and her non-attendance upon Wilhelm had filled him with dismay. "Weren't you in the cellars at that hour, Herr Eingen?" asked Wilhelm sternly.

"I was, your majesty—with twenty men with torches."

"And you heard no sound—no footsteps—no echoes?"

"None, your majesty, that the vastness of the vaults would not explain."

The usurper sat silent for a time, deep in thought. Now and again one of the waiting-women would sob hysterically. Carl Eingen's impatience grew apace. He longed for action, for some physical outlet for the anxiety that oppressed him. He had seen little of Fraulein Müller since she had been taken into the household of the Princess Hilda, but his boyhood had been spent in her companionship. He could not remember the time when he had not loved her. Her bright face and sunny nature had been to him for years a solace and a hope. That she had been lured into the perils that surrounded the path of the royal fugitives, he could not now doubt. The conviction filled him with dismay. He longed to begin at once a renewal of the fruitless search he had made in the early morning. He watched the changing expressions on Wilhelm's face anxiously. Presently the usurper spoke:

"Come here, Herr Schmidt," said Wilhelm, a cruel tone in his deep voice. "Seat yourself at this table and write as I direct. Are you ready? Go on then. 'To the people of Hesse-Heilfels, greeting: I, Wilhelm IX., by the grace of God king of Hesse-Heilfels, do call upon you to render up to me, dead or alive, the person of one Cousin Fritz, a dwarf, who has held, under my predecessor, the office of Court Jester. To the man or men who shall bring to my castle the body of said Cousin Fritz shall be paid the sum of five hundred marks. Given under my hand and seal, at the castle of Heilfels, this tenth day of August, 189–." There, I think that

may be effective in crushing out the last sparks of rebellion in this afflicted land. Have a hundred copies of that proclamation made at once, Herr Schmidt. See to it that they are exposed in every wine-shop in the kingdom. Take a few of them, Herr Eingen, and affix them to the walls in the most remote corners of the cellars under us. Oh, one moment, Herr Schmidt; add to the proclamation that a full pardon will be granted to any one who has been in rebellion against Wilhelm IX., in case he aids in the capture of Cousin Fritz. That may have an effect upon Reibach and Wollenstein, if they should see the notice. As I remember them, those two men are among the worst products of Brother Rudolph's worm-eaten vineyard. And now, gentlemen, let us break our fast. Ladies, I bid you good-morning. It is my fondest hope that you may have your mistress with you again at the earliest possible moment."

Wilhelm arose and the audience was at an end. With a heavy heart, Carl Eingen joined Herr Schmidt and prepared for another descent to the weird regions beneath the castle. Meanwhile the people of Hesse-Heilfels had begun the day under a new *régime*, and the whisper went abroad throughout the kingdom that indulgence in the game of draw-poker would be construed as the crime of *lesè majesté*.

CHAPTER XI.

CARL EINGEN had searched, as he believed, the most remote corner of the wine-cellar. He had taken with him no companion upon his subterranean bill-posting expedition, and, courageous though he was, he could not control a feeling of nervous discomfort as he fastened the grewsome proclamation of King Wilhelm to what he imagined was the last outpost in this tortuous hole in the ground. He had affixed type-written copies offering a reward for the capture of Cousin Fritz, dead or alive, to wine casks, stone walls, and wooden pillars in various parts of the cellar, and he breathed a sigh of relief at the thought that his grim task was at an end. Suddenly a harsh, shrill voice, just above his head, cried out:

"Ha Carl Eingen, I'm worth five hundred marks, eh? I'll throw you double or quits for my body. What say you?"

Carl started in affright, and dropped the hammer he held in his hand. Perched upon a huge hogshead sat Cousin Fritz, his feathered cap upon his head, smiling down mischievously at the astonished youth.

"Will you come up and take me?" asked the dwarf maliciously, moving his short sword in the air and then making a few defiant passes at his antagonist. "Do you need money, Carl? Five hundred marks! It is a large sum."

Carl Eingen remained silent, but he could not suppress a smile as the ludicrous features of the situation impressed him. Suddenly the dwarf's mood changed.

"You're a good fellow, Carl Eingen, in spite of your rebellious nature," he said gently. "I don't believe you'd murder me in cold blood. That's more than I could say of several men I know. As times go, Carl, it's high praise."

"I think, Cousin Fritz," said Carl quietly, "that you'd better come with me without more ado. You're sure to be captured down here and you might be run to earth by somebody who would think it less trouble to take you dead than alive. I promise you that I'll do my best to make easy terms for you with the king."

"What king, Carl?" asked the dwarf mockingly, "You may not know it, but I am the real, the only king of Hesse-Heilfels. In the long run I dictate my own terms—and they are always accepted, Carl Eingen. Do you call Brother Wilhelm king? Nonsense! He's only an upstart who struts about up above for a time and then falls to sleep like the rest. Hesse-Heilfels has only one king—and he never dies. But enough of this, Carl! I won't come to you and you can't capture me. Nevertheless, I prefer you as an ally to a foe. I'll make you a proposition."

Carl Eingen frowned and strode nervously up and down, almost within reach of the dwarf's pointed shoes. He felt absurdly conscious of his momentary impotence. He was keenly alive to the possibility that he would be obliged to return to Wilhelm and confess that he had been outwitted by the dwarf.

Furthermore, Cousin Fritz was in possession of a secret that Carl Eingen longed to solve. Upon the hogshead above him sat the captor of Fraulein Müller, and her lover burned to get word of her. He knew, right well, that only by diplomacy could he make Cousin Fritz reveal the truth concerning her abduction.

"Go on," said Carl smoothly, "let me hear your proposition, Cousin Fritz."

The dwarf chuckled with inward merriment. Then he bent forward, his hand still upon his sword, and said:

"You think me mad, Carl Eingen, but you'd do well to back my hand at this crisis in the game. In this case one king beats a royal flush. I'm the king, and I know my power. Let me tell you, Carl Eingen, that you will never see again a face that you love nor hear a voice that has grown dear to you unless you heed what I shall say. It has come to a contest between your loyalty and your love. If you remain true to Wilhelm, you will be false to your love. If you place your mistress above your king in your heart, you must forswear Wilhelm. Do you follow me?"

There was a sane intensity in the dwarf's manner that Carl Eingen had never observed before. It impressed him even more than the madcap's words.

"And if I abandon Wilhelm, Cousin Fritz?" asked Carl earnestly.

"You shall see your love again, Carl Eingen."

"And otherwise?"

"The sweet face of Gretchen Müllershall smile upon you only from the shadows

of the night, when memory haunts your pillow and drives sleep routed from your couch."

Carl Eingen looked about him restlessly. The dark mysteries of this weird cellar appeared to cast upon him an uncanny spell. He seemed to be plunged into a shadow-haunted realm in which laws that were new to him prevailed. The dwarf, smiling with conscious power, seemed to exert a hypnotic influence over the impressionable youth, whose artistic sensibilities rendered him extremely sensitive to the influences of a romantic environment.

Furthermore, the threat uttered by the dwarf had had its effect. Carl Eingen longed passionately to gaze once more upon a face that had been for years the fairest sight earth held for him. The possibility—remote and unreasonable as it seemed—that this little mischief-maker could remove Gretchen Müller forever from his ken thrilled him with unspeakable dread. Instinctively he seemed to realize that Cousin Fritz was not wholly a vain boaster, that he was not without some portion of the boundless power he claimed.

"Well, Cousin Fritz," said Carl at length, his voice hoarse and unsteady, "I will go to this point, and no further. If you will lead me at once to Fraulein Müller, I give you my word that I will take no advantage of what I have learned, that neither Wilhelm nor any of his people shall know that I have met you down here."

The dwarf laughed mockingly and sprang to the floor. "It's unconditional surrender, even on those terms," he cried. "What I have left undone, Fraulein Müller will ac-

complish. Look here, Carl Eingen! See how powerless you were."

Cousin Fritz skipped merrily toward the proclamation that offered a reward for his capture. Removing it from the wall he playfully tore it into small pieces. Suddenly, to Carl's amazement, a black hole gaped at them where the paper had rested but a moment before.

"In here, Carl," cried the dwarf, scrambling through the aperture. "You thought you had reached the end of the cellar. This is merely the entrance, my friend."

For a moment the youth hesitated. When, after much squeezing and a good deal of discomfort, he stood beside Cousin Fritz, his guide's figure was almost lost in the deep gloom.

"Come on," said the dwarf, seizing Carl's hand. "We have not far to go; we are taking a short cut to my apartments—the real centre of royalty in Hesse-Heilfels."

A moment later they stepped out into a passageway that soon led them to the main entrance of the rooms in which the dwarf had ensconced Rudolph XI. and his small suite. Cautiously opening the heavy door, Cousin Fritz tightly gripped Carl Eingen's arm and silently pointed to the scene before them.

In the centre of the hall the deposed king was seated at a table, at the opposite side of which Count von Reibach shuffled a pack of cards. Between them were small piles of pebbles that roughly served as chips. Baron Wollenstein, with a surly expression upon his heavy face, appeared to watch the game, but his restless eyes constantly turned tow-

ard a group at the farther corner of the room. The Princess Hilda, attended by Fraulein Müller, was seated in an antique chair of state, against the back of which her head rested as she gazed upward at Herr Bennett. The American, oblivious of the threatening glances of Baron Wollenstein, was bending forward talking earnestly to the golden-haired princess. A smile played across her face as she listened to his words.

"There, Carl Eingen," whispered the dwarf mischievously, "is the game as it stands. Will you draw cards?"

"Yes," answered the youth hoarsely as he met the eye of Fraulein Müller, who turned white with amazement as she caught sight of him.

CHAPTER XII.

THERE was nothing in the topic upon which Bennett was discoursing to the Princess Hilda to arouse the jealousy of Baron Wollenstein. The American was speaking eloquently, but impersonally, of his native land. The events of the night and the ominous inaction of the morning had rendered the princess a willing listener to the voice of a man to whom, she felt, she had shown great injustice. Womanlike, having reached the conclusion that she had not treated him with fairness, she now went to the extreme of trusting Bennett fully. Her discovery of the utter baseness of Wollenstein and von Reibach added to the longing she felt to prove that the American was not unworthy of her regard.

"It is true," said Bennett smilingly, "that my beautiful country is not made picturesque by antique castles, but, your Royal Highness, you must admit that I have no cause to hold it in contempt for that reason." He glanced around the gloomy apartment meaningly.

The princess understood him, and her eyes were sympathetic as they met his. "But an old castle has its advantages," she remarked, with forced gayety. "It is crystallized history, is it not? Furthermore, it may offer a place of refuge in time of trouble."

"Ah," said Bennett, loyal to his American

prejudices, "that is just the point. In my country, we need no underground cellars to escape the wrath of man. We use them for another purpose. But don't think me narrow-minded, Your Highness. I appreciate the advantages your country offers to the tourist, to the lover of romance, but, as a place of residence, I must admit that I prefer Litchfield County to Hesse-Heilfels."

The Princess Hilda sat silent for a moment. Her mind dwelt upon the ruin this man had wrought in the land she loved. She had been forced to the conclusion that the disaster he had brought to Hesse-Heilfels had been the outcome not of malice, but of mischance. Nevertheless, he had been the motive force, at the outset, that had overthrown the *régime* of which she was a part. How far was it becoming for her to accept his friendship? She could not answer. Of her own free-will she had thrown down the barrier between them, and it was too late, perhaps, to reconstruct it.

The Princess Hilda was only eighteen years of age. The full significance of the political revolution of which she was a victim had not yet come to her. Had she possessed a wider and deeper experience of the ways of the world, the embarrassments that surrounded her would have impressed her more deeply. But she was very young, and, it is the peril and the privilege of youth to make light of difficulties that appear insuperable to the eyes of maturity. Furthermore, the princess was undergoing a novel experience that possessed for her a dangerous fascination. The rigid etiquette of the old-fashioned court in which she had spent her

girlhood had precluded the possibility of frank and sympathetic intercourse with young men. An American girl of eighteen is apt to be as wise as a serpent, though harmless as a dove. She is sure of herself. She takes pride in the conviction that she understands men. What she has failed to learn of the peculiarities of human nature from experience, she has derived from literature and the drama. She makes her *début* in society a full-fledged woman of the world. If she is clever, her epigrams are as pointed at eighteen as they will be at twenty-eight.

But a German princess develops more slowly. She is hedged around by safeguards erected on the theory that there should be no royal road to worldliness. She is moulded by ceremonies and fashioned by precedents. She is deprived by birth of the divine right to choose a husband. At eighteen she has become merely a more or less ornamental piece in a royal game of chess. The American girl of the same age is years older than the German princess.

Let it not be imagined, however, that Jonathan Edwards Bennett found the Princess Hilda of Hesse-Heilfels too young and unsophisticated to be interesting. While her recent experiences may not have assumed in her mind their ultimate significance, they had had, neverthless, a marked effect in changing her mental attitude toward many subjects. At one blow she had been thrust into an entirely new relationhip to the universe at large. Heretofore, she had been led to believe that the sun rose and set merely for her own royal pleasure and profit. Suddenly even the light of that luminary had

been denied to her. The immediate effect of this deprivation had been educational. For the first time in her life she had been brought face to face with the fact that royalty itself is subject to the chastisement that fate so freely bestows upon lesser mortals.

"Tell me, Herr Bennett," she said after a time, glancing significantly at the poker-players in the centre of the room, "what will be the outcome of all this? We can't live here all our days. I should become an old woman in a year if I could never see the sun, never hear the wind among the trees."

A smile played across her shapely mouth, but her eyes were sad as they looked up at the pale, handsome face above her.

"Do you know, your royal highness," said Bennett, lowering his voice, confidentially, "I have come to the conclusion that the solution of the puzzle rests with Cousin Fritz. It is a novel experience for me to suspend my own judgment and trust to another man to get me out of difficulties, but the little madcap's cleverness and loyalty have had a hypnotic effect upon my will. More and more do I find myself inclined to follow his lead, to await his commands, and to trust to his ingenuity to get us out of this amazing scrape."

The Princess Hilda assented. "Cousin Fritz," she said, "has become, I fear, our only hope. What he can do for us now I can't imagine, but, Herr Bennett, there is some satisfaction in the thought that we can never be worse off than we are at present."

The American uttered a few words of perfunctory acquiescence. He envied her the undismayed optimism of extreme youth. The conviction had come upon him that they

might easily be placed in a more undesirable position than they occupied at that moment.

"Herr Bennett," said the princess, a slight flush of embarrassment coming into her cheeks. "I was pleased to hear you speak so kindly of Cousin Fritz, but let me urge you to beware of the others. Cousin Fritz is your friend. The others hate you."

Bennett smiled gently. "Thank you for your warning, Princess Hilda. I know well that they seek my life. But I have no fear of them. Some years ago, your royal highness, I was mining in Colorado, and——"

It was many a long day before the Princess Hilda heard the conclusion of the anecdote Bennett was about to relate. Something in her face had caused him to turn and glance toward the entrance. He caught a glimpse of Cousin Fritz making a gesture toward them, and then his eyes rested in dismay upon the tall, martial figure of Carl Eingen.

"Good God, we are betrayed!" exclaimed Bennett, stepping forward and placing his hand upon the handle of his revolver.

At that instant a groan, wrung from a strong man in physical agony, arose from the centre of the room, and King Rudolph, who had sprung up from the poker table as Fritz and Carl appeared at the doorway, fell senseless into the arms of Baron Wollenstein.

"Put up your pistol, Herr Bennett," piped Cousin Fritz, excitedly. "This man is our friend. Here, put the king on this couch! Get some wine, Fraulein Müller. Hurry. Baron Wollenstein, put his head down! There! Are you all paralyzed? Can't you make haste? Will you take a bluff from death? I won't. There, see! Cousin Rudolph opens

his eyes! Give him wine! That's right! He'll be every inch a king before long! Come, now, stand back and let him sleep! That's right. Sleep, Rudolph! Sleep!"

Without dissent or hesitation they had all obeyed the dwarf's directions to the letter, and as they stood grouped around the couch, upon which Rudolph lay breathing stertorously, the thought suddenly flashed through their minds, in sympathetic accord for the moment, that Cousin Fritz was no vain boaster when he claimed to be the real ruler of Hesse-Heilfels.

CHAPTER XIII.

"FRANKLY, your royal highness," said Herr Bennett to the princess fifteen minutes later, "there are symptoms in the case that worry me. At first, I thought his majesty was attacked by a simple fainting fit, caused by his sudden rising at the table. His breathing, however, and other indications lead me to believe that he is in a very precarious condition."

They stood together apart, while Fraulein Müller and Carl Eingen, conversing in low whispers, watched beside the prostrated king.

Count von Reibach and Baron Wollenstein, not unnoticed by Cousin Fritz, had left the apartment together.

"We must have a talk at once, Count," Wollenstein had said to his fellow-conspirator. "Come into the cellars with me. We won't be missed at this moment." Unknown to them, the dwarf had stolen into the dark vaults by their side so close to them that he could hear every word they said.

"Is he hard hit, Baron?" asked Count von Reibach. "It looks to me like apoplexy."

"I think it is," answered Wollenstein, taking his companion by the arm and groping toward a better lighted portion of the cellar that lay beyond them. "He's been a sick man for some time back, Count. I'm in-

clined to think that the suddenness of his overthrow has precipitated an attack that could not have been long delayed."

"And what, to your mind, is our best play at this juncture, Baron?" asked von Reibach impressively. The serious nature of the crisis that confronted them had suddenly broken upon his not very active mind. His companion made no answer, but stood still, his head turned to one side.

"The very thing," whispered Wollenstein hoarsely. "Read that, Count! How it got here I can't imagine, but it's a wonderful stroke of luck at this juncture."

Count von Reibach followed his companion's gaze and saw before them a type-written placard, the contents of which the reader has already learned.

The count indulged in a weak whistle to relieve his astonishment. "Dead or alive!" he exclaimed. "It ought to be easy, Baron. I could put the dwarf in my pocket—if I could get my hands on him."

Wollenstein grunted deprecatingly, "We cannot afford to take any chances, Count," he said emphatically. "We are in a desperate position. Our heads are forfeit to the state unless we can take our fatted calf with us when we go above as returning prodigals. It's all very well to talk about capturing the dwarf alive, but you can't catch rats in this infernal cellar by chasing them. Our only chance lies in seizing Cousin Fritz and rendering all opportunity of escape impossible at one stroke. It's easily done. Let me get hold of the little imp once and Wilhelm shall have a court jester, dead or alive, as the case may be." There was a cruel menace in the

baron's voice that was carefully noted by a dwarfish eavesdropper.

"What was that?" asked the count, starting nervously and gazing into the shadows with straining eyes.

"Ach Gott! Are you scared by rats?" muttered the baron sarcastically. "Now come to the point, Count! Do you understand me? We must act, and act immediately. Our only hope lies in the capture of the dwarf. We must set about it at once, and take him—dead or alive."

"Yes, dead or alive," repeated Count von Reibach mechanically, seizing his companion's arm and turning to retrace his steps.

There came a snapping sound, as though a trap had been sprung somewhere in the darkness. The floor slipped away in creaking grooves and at the edge of the abyss stood Cousin Fritz, smiling maliciously as he gazed down into the blackness. A dull sound, as if huge rubber balls had struck the centre of the earth, came up through the grewsome hole.

"Two of a kind!" cried the madman, in a shrill, penetrating voice. "Two of a kind—and I've discarded them!"

He whistled gayly as he scurried back toward his apartments. Now and then he would break into song and his keen voice would startle the bats from slumber in the furthermost recesses of the great vaults.

"Two of a kind! Two of a kind! Two of a kind!" he cried with hysterical energy now and again. "Two of a kind, but a very small pair! Ha, ha! I had no use for two of a kind, two of a kind, two of a kind!"

Suddenly he stood still and listened in-

tently. "The King is dead, long live the King!" he shouted, and the cellar re-echoed the weird cry. "The King is dead! Live the King!"

At that moment Bennett had placed a detaining hand upon the Princess Hilda's arm. The cumulative force of the adventures through which they had passed together had rendered ceremoniousness out of place at this juncture.

"The need of aid from above has passed, your highness," said Bennett gently. "I beg you to remain here. The King is——"

"Is dead," added the princess sadly.

At that instant far down the cellar they heard the dwarf's voice crying shrilly: "The King is dead! Live the King!"

Bennett gazed at the princess in amazement.

"'Tis Cousin Fritz's voice. But how did he know? How did he know?"

CHAPTER XIV.

"ARE you very tired, your highness?"

Bennett peered down at the pale face at his side. He held a candle in his hand as they groped slowly forward in a tunnel that Cousin Fritz ascribed to the Romans. Beyond them gleamed another unsteady light, carried by Carl Eingen. Now and then they could hear a penetrating voice raised in song or lowered in soliloquy as Cousin Fritz guided them toward their goal.

The Princess Hilda and Fraulein Müller had laid aside their court attire and had donned peasant costumes, of a very antique cut, which Cousin Fritz had obtained from his collection of old-fashioned trumpery, a collection from which the social history of Hesse-Heilfels for several generations could have been reconstructed by an imaginative writer.

The princess looked up at Bennett, a merry gleam in her dark blue eyes:

"I'm tired, yes; but not of action. I am weary of imprisonment. I long to reach the end of this tunnel. I feel as though I were approaching the sunlight after being buried alive for centuries."

"But, tell me," he persisted, his voice low and vibrant, "will you never regret your decision? Think of what you have given up. When you donned that peasant's dress you

laid aside a future that shone with the splendors of high state. That simple cap upon your head replaces a queen's diadem. The sacrifice, your highness, is more than I can ask."

"Why will you tease me?" she cried with petulant playfulness. "When I put off my court dress, I gave up forever the title of 'your highness.' What has that title brought to me? Nothing but weariness and pain."

Just beyond them she could see Carl Eingen with his arm around the waist of Fraulein Müller. "Do you think," asked Hilda, her eyes dancing as they met Bennett's, "do you think that Gretchen would wish to return to my court with the knowledge that Carl Eingen was forever an exile from the kingdom?"

Bennett trembled with a sensation of ecstatic triumph. His mind recalled the thought that had inspired him when he followed the Princess Hilda into the cellar on the night of the king's overthrow. In this subterranean realm there would be no kings and princesses. They would all be fugitives, placed upon a plane of equality by the levelling power of misfortune. Beyond his wildest dreams, that thought had been prophetic. By no conscious effort upon his part, he had won the confidence, perhaps the love, of this woman at his side. The hand of sorrow had laid its grip upon her young heart, and in the hour of her misfortune she had looked at life with eyes that saw all things from a new point of view.

"It is strange," she whispered as they stole forward through the damp and narrow passageway, "it is strange that I should feel for

my old life no regret, no desire to return to the tawdry glories of a court. But do you know, Herr Bennett, I feel that I would rather die in this old cellar than go back to my people, to be stared at by the gaping crowds, to hear the murmur of their senseless chatter as they told each other the tale of my burial and resurrection. Ugh! The very thought of it is horrible."

They hurried on in silence for a time.

"I shall live with Carl and Gretchen," she said musingly, when they had turned a corner in the tunnel and had again caught sight of the candle in Eingen's hand. "We will go to some quiet spot and till the soil and forget the treachery that drove us from our fatherland. I shall be happy in their happiness—and forget—forget—forget!"

Bennett bent down until his face almost touched hers.

"You must not forget," he whispered, "that there lives a man whose only wish on earth is to know that your heart is light, that your eyes are bright with the joy of life, that no shadows fall across your path."

Suddenly through the tunnel came the shrill voice of the dwarf, chanting mischievously the refrain, "Two of a kind." Then a mocking laugh followed the words into the echoing vaults far behind the fugitives.

The Princess Hilda shuddered, and placed a light hand upon Bennett's arm.

"Do you know what he did to them?" she asked nervously.

"He won't tell me," answered Bennett; "all that he will say is that they were 'a small pair' and he 'discarded' them."

Again the princess shuddered, and quick-

ened her steps. Suddenly the candle carried by Carl Eingen flickered vigorously, and almost succumbed to a damp draught. The princess glanced up at Bennett joyfully.

"Look at Carl's candle," she exclaimed. "Do you know what that means, Herr Bennett? We are near the entrance, or rather, the exit to the tunnel. The Rhine, Herr Bennett, the dear, old Rhine is waiting to take us to its heart."

Her voice trembled with excitement and she stumbled as she darted ahead. By a quick movement Bennett's arm caught her as she fell forward. Forgetful of everything but his burning love, he held her pressed against him as he rained passionate kisses upon her lips and cheeks.

"I love you, Hilda, I love you! I love you!" he whispered wildly. "You are my queen! my queen! Do not tremble so! See, I will be gentle! Just one more kiss, my darling! One more kiss! One more kiss!"

"Two of a kind, two of a kind, two of a kind," cried a harsh voice, close at hand. "There, Carl Eingen, is the river, and here's the boat! Pull it up close to the wall. That's right Ha, ha! I must discard again! This time it's two pair! Two pair! Ha, ha!"

Carl Eingen had entered the flat-bottomed boat and had placed the oars in the rowlocks, after seating Fraulein Müller in the stern.

The Princess Hilda and Herr Bennett stood upon the stone-work that jutted out from the tunnel's opening. The breeze that swept across the bosom of the Rhine caressed their cheeks and made free with Hilda's golden locks. Behind them stood Cousin Fritz, cap in hand, as though he did the honors of his

mansion to home-going guests. Bennett gave his hand to the princess and she seated herself by Fraulein Müller's side.

"Come, Cousin Fritz," cried Bennett, his voice vibrant with the joy that filled his soul, "into the boat! Quick! We can afford to take no risks—Wilhelm's sentinel may have sharp eyes. Quick, I say!"

Cousin Fritz stepped back into the tunnel. His small, white wizened face became a ghostly vision against the black depths behind him.

"Farewell," he cried in his thin, mocking voice, "farewell! My kingdom needs its king, and I return! Remember Cousin Fritz, King of Hesse-Heilfels for a thousand years! Farewell!"

Bennett pushed the boat into the current and jumped aboard. With powerful strokes Carl Eingen urged the clumsy craft toward the centre of the stream. Suddenly across the black waste of waters between them and the shore came a piercing voice as they heard the disjointed words:

"Two pair! Discard two pair! Draw to kings! Ha, ha! Draw to kings! Ha, ha!"

CHAPTER XV.

SEPTEMBER in the Berkshire hills makes Litchfield, Connecticut, an attractive place to people of leisure who like to watch nature as she doffs her summer garb of green and yellow and dons the purple and scarlet raiment that autumn provides for her.

Upon the broad piazza of a hotel commanding a wide view of a hill country unrivalled for beauty in the new world sat several men and women indulging in the idle gossip that falls from the lips of people who have nothing more serious confronting them than a game of golf or a drive through the woods.

"Anything interesting in the *Trumpet*, Hal?" asked a youth, attired in a most unbecoming golf costume, glancing at a young man who held in his hands a copy of the latest issue of Litchfield's weekly newspaper.

"Calvin Johnson has put a new coat of paint on his barn," answered the news-reader solemnly. "Mrs. Rogers spent Sunday with friends in Roxbury."

"Oh, stop it, Hal," cried a vivacious young woman, putting up her hand imperiously. "You'll drive us all away if you keep on."

"Wait a moment! Let me read you something of more interest," said the young man with the newspaper impressively. "This is the *pièce de résistance* of the week's *Trumpet*:

"'We take pleasure in informing our readers that Jonathan Edwards Bennett, an old resident of Litchfield, has returned from a long sojourn in Europe and has reopened the Bennett homestead on Main Street. Mr. Bennett is accompanied by his wife. Rumor has it that Mrs. Bennett is a daughter of one of the oldest and most aristocratic families in central Europe. Mr. and Mrs. Bennett are entertaining their friends, Mr. and Mrs. Eingen, of Germany, who will remain in Litchfield until late in the fall. The *Trumpet* is informed that Mr. Bennett will take up his residence permanently in Litchfield. It is understood that he will devote much time to politics. We congratulate our fellow-townsmen upon Mr. Bennett's return to his native heath and take pleasure in bidding him welcome.'"

"That explains it, then!" exclaimed the vivacious young woman excitedly, "That must have been Mrs. Bennett we saw yesterday, Marion. She is really a beautiful woman, with magnificent golden hair and the dearest blue eyes! She's a perfect love! Isn't she, Marion?"

"She is, indeed," answered the girl appealed to.

"Jonathan Edwards Bennett," repeated one of the men who had listened to the *Trumpet's* choice tid-bit. "He was in my class at Yale. A clever fellow, but restless. They used to say of him that he would be famous or a failure before he had been out in the world five years."

"And has he been a success?" drawled the youth in the golf suit.

"Of course he has," cried the vivacious

young woman, "hasn't he married a beautiful girl with golden hair and blue eyes? Surely, he could ask nothing better of life than that."

Could Jonathan Edwards Bennett have heard these words he would have acknowledged that the vivacious young woman spoke the truth.

THE END.

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